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ZAPPON

Illustration by
Yasumo

BANISHED
FROM THE
HERO'S
PARTY,

I Decided to Live a Quiet Life
in the Countryside



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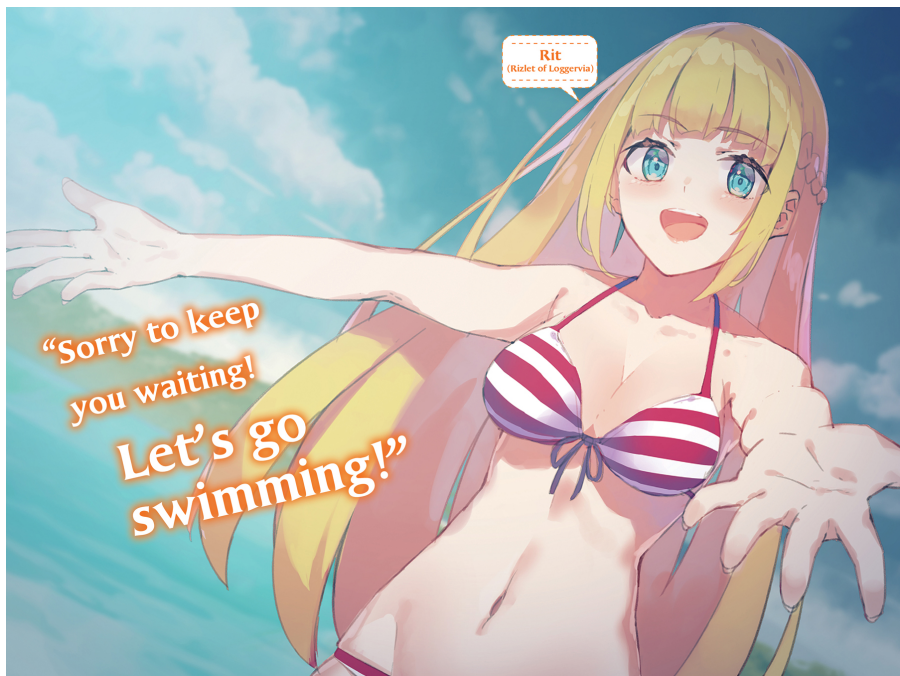
I Decided to Live a Quiet Life
in the Countryside

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Illustration by Yasumo







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Afterword



Illustration: Yasumo
Design Work: Shindousha

"Riding drakes are just the best!"

"It's been a while since I rode a drake, but it's more than worth the price for how refreshing it is! This is great!"

Red
(Gideon Ragnason)

The drakes roared, delighted at being able to really cut loose as we spurred them on.





It looked like a seafaring vessel with several spinning propellers in place of sails lifting the giant ship into the sky.



"It's an airship."

Tisse Garland

Theodora
Dephilo

Ares Srowa

"These are greater wings than befit me."

Ruti Ragnason

BANISHED FROM THE HERO'S PARTY,

I Decided to Live a Quiet Life
in the Countryside

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Illustration by
Yasumo

YEN
ON
New York

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Banished from the Hero's Party, I Decided to Live a Quiet Life in the Countryside, Vol. 2

Zappon

Translation by Dale DeLucia

Cover art by Yasumo

[illegible]

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SHIN NO NAKAMA JYANAI TO YUUSHA NO PARTY WO
 OIDASARETANODE, HENKYOU DE SLOW—LIFE SURUKOTO NI
 SHIMASHITA Vol. 2

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Illustration: Yasumo
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CHARACTERS



Red
(Gideon Ragnason)

Kicked out of the Hero's party, he headed to the frontier to live a slow life. One of humanity's greatest swordsmen with many feats to his name.



Rit
(Rizlet of Loggervia)

The princess of the Duchy of Loggervia. Adventured with Red's party in the past. One thing led to another, and she forced herself into Red's shop and is now living with him. An easily embarrassed girl who has outgrown her more combative phase.



Albert Leland

The frontier's strongest adventurer. Has the Divine Blessing of the Champion and a strong ambition to move up in the world. Although in the top tier for the frontier, he ended up drifting out to Zoltan after not being able to cut it in Central.



Ruti Ragnason

Red's younger sister and possessor of the Divine Blessing of the Hero, humanity's strongest blessing. She was extremely attached to her big brother and always clung to him when the two were younger. Before he left the party, Red used to dote on his cute little sister.



Ares Srowa

Bearer of the Divine Blessing of the Sage, greatest of the Mage blessings. The man who pushed Red out of the party. Son of a failed duke, he joined the Hero's party in order to restore his family's power.



Tisse Garland

A young girl with the Divine Blessing of the Assassin, she was brought in by Ares to replace Red. Largely expressionless but has the greatest common sense of anyone in the Hero's party. Keeps a pet spider she named Mister Crawly Wawly.

Theodora Dephilo

The pinnacle of human clerics and assistant instructor of the temple knight's style of spear wielding. Bearer of the Divine Blessing of the Crusader. A warrior at heart, she has a stoic personality. Has a high opinion of Red's abilities.

Darjan LeBeau

A big, brawny man with the Divine Blessing of the Martial Artist. Used to be the master of a dojo in a town that was destroyed by the demon lord's army. Despite this, there is no trace of that dark past in his hearty personality.

Yarandrala

A high elf with the Divine Blessing of the Singer of the Trees. She is capable of controlling plants. Became a member of the Hero's party during the battle in Loggervia. Among her companions, Red was the one she trusted the most, but...



Prologue

Petrified and Alone

Ruti had yet to set off on her journey.

“Ngh.” A pained cry escaped the girl’s lips. A tomahawk thrown by a goblin had hit her arm. Ruti’s face twisted as she put pressure on the wound to staunch the flow of crimson.

“Ruti!”

Immediately, I leaped in front of her. Knocking aside two more hurled hatchets with my sword, I grabbed Ruti and quickly retreated back behind a rock.

“Sorry, Big Brother...”

“Don’t be. It’s only been a day since you first picked up a sword.”

I smiled to put her at ease and readied my knight’s blade. Breaking into a dash, I moved back out from behind our cover. A few more tomahawks came flying, but I dodged them handily and cut down the group of goblins that had thrown them. Only one of the creatures remained—the goblin chief with an Axman blessing who’d hurt Ruti.

The creature picked up the two-handed battle-ax sticking out of the ground in front of it and readied itself. While it exuded the sort of confidence one only had after having seen countless battles, I didn’t hesitate to ready my own weapon and move in. Ruti was behind me, and I had to protect her, after all.

Just as the goblin’s ax came hurtling down toward me from overhead, I firmly slammed my front foot down, bringing my sprint to a sudden halt. With a whoosh, the heavy thing whistled past before slamming into the ground. Taking advantage of the opening, I ran the goblin chief through with my sword. After making sure it was dead, I went back to check on Ruti.

“Are you all right?” I asked.

“It just hurts a little...” Ruti groaned as she tried to stop the bleeding.

Retrieving some medicine and water from a pouch, I washed the wound and applied a poultice made of henbane and coca leaves that’d been crushed into a paste. That done, I wrapped the spot in a cloth

bandage.

"It should be all right now," I said.

"...It stopped hurting...", Ruti observed as she shifted her arm a bit to check.

"We'll have to reapply that stuff in another three hours, but the injury should close up by nighttime."

While not quite as potent as magic, medicine prepared using a skill could be incredibly effective. Curatives I prepared could even restore skin and muscle, closing a wound that would normally require stitches.

"You're amazing, Big Brother."

"Try not to take unnecessary risks. Seeing you get hurt is painful for me."

"Really?" Ruti seemed to be thinking about something for a moment before staring straight into my eyes. "...But it doesn't hurt when you put medicine on it."

She had a gentle smile as she touched the bandage on her arm.

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Before our eyes stood a dust dragon with dark scales. It was a deadly monster whose mere presence brought decay upon the surrounding land.

We'd come to hunt the dragons that nested near the Torch Mountain Road because there'd been word that a few travelers had been attacked, but this was beyond what we'd prepared for. At best, we'd only taken out an ash dragon of maybe twenty years. This dust dragon looked to be an adult of perhaps a hundred.

"Watch out!" I called, but my warning was too late.

The scaly thing's maw opened, and a blast of its deadly breath shot out. Fragments of things the dragon had consumed over the years sped through the air, coated in toxic bile. Ruti took a direct hit and, in an instant, was riddled with cuts and scrapes. Were it not for her Immunity to Poison afforded by her Hero's blessing, Ruti's whole body would've been hideously burned by the acidic attack.

Even with so many fresh wounds, Ruti pressed forward, undaunted. The dragon appeared shaken to see that she hadn't even flinched in the face of its deadly breath weapon. In a panic, the great beast readied another blast, but Ruti sprang forward and thrust her Holy Demon Slayer up through the dragon's jaw and into its brain. Gurgling caustic liquids all the while, the monster slumped to the ground.

"Are you all right, Ruti?!"

I made to dash over to my younger sister, but she used the

Healing Hands spell to mend her wounds. In the few seconds it took me to reach her, she was already good as new—there wasn't ever a chance for me to help.

“That's the Hero for you.”

Ares and the others gathered around Ruti, praising the way she'd fought. Clearly, even a hundred-year-old dragon was no longer a challenge for her, yet I was still standing outside the little circle our party members had formed around my sister with a hand at my medicine pouch.

Chapter 1

I Don't Have Time to Be Adventuring

According to the calendar, it was autumn, but you wouldn't have known it from the sweltering heat in Zoltan.

With broom in hand, I swept up the area in front of the shop. Most of the trees still hadn't changed, evidenced by how few leaves there were to sweep up. As winter approached, I knew there would be more, however.

Placing the broom against one side of the building, the last thing I did before heading back inside was take a rag hanging from my belt and use it to polish the new sign we recently had made.

RED & RIT'S APOTHECARY. A warmth welled up in my heart as I beheld each of the little letters that shone in the morning sun.

"I'm through in here, Red," a voice called from inside the shop.

That was Rit, the girl who lived with me. I'd entrusted her with preparations inside, and it seemed she'd just wrapped that up.

"Things are all done outside, too; shall we open for the day?" I asked as I sauntered back inside.

"Yeah!" Rit replied as she clutched her hands together in front of her ample chest. "Let's do our best today."

"Yeah, let's," I responded. Admittedly, it took everything I had to keep a straight face. Rit was so cute that my jaw nearly dropped.

Perhaps seeing through my facade, Rit's expression screwed up a bit before she frantically pulled her bandanna up to cover the grin that was spreading across her face.

Such were the sort of slow Zoltan days I spent after having been kicked out of the Hero's party.

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Today marked the day of my regular delivery of medicines to Dr. Newman, the neighborhood physician. Entrusting the store to Rit, I departed for Newman's clinic with a box of medicine slung over my back and the sun beating down on my head.

My destination was located at one end of the working-class

district. It was a grayish building, though the walls had no doubt been white originally, and you would've been hard-pressed to say that it looked clean. It was a cozy little place that had supposedly been a clinic even before Dr. Newman had bought it. The building contained one examination room, a reception desk, a waiting room, and one storage room.

Compared to other infirmaries, it was fairly small. It didn't even have a proper office space for Dr. Newman. He resorted to keeping files spread around between the storage and examination rooms. His exam fees were on the cheaper side, maybe because of how small his place of business was, but that low price point made it quite the regular place for residents on the poorer side of town.

"Oh, Red! Thanks for coming by." Dr. Newman had a towel wrapped around his receding hairline as he examined a child who'd come down with a cold. "Take a load off in the waiting room for a minute. I'll see you once I'm done here."

"Please have a seat," the teenage girl at the reception desk called out cheerfully, though she didn't appear to be paying too much attention.

I helped myself to a chair and glanced around. There was an older lady nodding off in her seat. It seemed likely that she was the grandmother of the kid in the examination room.

A wooden wyvern race board game was laid out, probably for people to kill time while waiting. From the look of how worn it was, it'd been in service for quite a long time. Since glass was expensive, the one window in the waiting room was just an open-air aperture. At night, it would be closed over with a wooden shutter. Hanging in the pane was a little bronze wind chime that sang tinkling notes whenever the breeze picked up. Wind chimes originally came from the dark continent. They'd been brought over in the course of the battles with the demon lord's army, but most people used them without paying much attention to their unpleasant history.

Before too long, the child returned to the waiting room with flushed cheeks, Dr. Newman not far behind.

"I'll give you some medicine now, but if you run out and need more, then please head to the apothecary that Red over there runs. You can just show him this prescription, and he'll give you the right stuff," Dr. Newman instructed. He then proceeded to give instructions on how to find my place.

"Oh, Red, you finally got your own shop? That's lovely," the old woman in the waiting room said.

"Thank you. And if you ever need anything for yourself, feel free to stop by, ma'am," I replied.

"Ah, if you have something for hip pain, I might just have to take

you up on that.”

The kid and his grandmother left several bronze coins at the reception, said their thanks to the doctor, and headed home. Glancing over at the counter, I counted eight little dusk-colored coins.

“Eight commons is pretty cheap,” I observed.

“I got two bags of sausages in exchange, too,” Dr. Newman answered.

Ah, a bit of bartering. Right, that old lady runs a butcher shop.

“Sorry to keep you waiting. Mind if I have a look at what you’ve brought?” Dr. Newman inquired.

“Go right ahead,” I responded.

After opening up the box of medicine I had set on the ground, I handed over the receipt for the order. Dr. Newman read the itemization while I pulled each entry out of the box to show him it was there.

“Just as ordered. Which reminds me, I don’t suppose you’ve been able to get your hands on any more blood needles, have you?”

“It’s going to be tough to get any more this year.”

“No luck, huh? All right then.”

“Summer’ll be over in another month or so; is there a big demand for them or something?”

“No more than usual, but not having any on hand is worrisome, nonetheless. Traveling merchants haven’t stocked many, and if they catch on that we don’t have any at all, they’ll raise their prices.”

Our conversation continued along those lines for a little bit when we suddenly heard a shout from outside. Next came the thudding of someone collapsing and what sounded like plates shattering.

“What was that?” I asked.

The two of us stepped outside to see what’d happened. Up and down the street, a number of other people were doing the same. Murmurs and glances were cast every which way.

“The voice came from inside that house,” I observed.

“So it would seem.” Dr. Newman nodded in agreement.

My hand drifted to the hilt of the sword at my waist as we approached the home where the scream had come from.

“This is where Jackson resides. A middle-aged man who lives alone. I’ve seen him at the clinic several times. He tends to drink a bit too much,” the doctor explained.

“Do you think he fell over because he was drunk?”

“It would be nice if that was all it was.”

I knocked on the door. “Hey, Jackson. You okay in there?” There wasn’t any proper response, but my ears caught a groaning sound. “Sorry, but we’re coming in!”

Unfortunately, the door was locked. Without a second thought, I

drew my sword, pressed the tip against the keyhole, and broke the lock.

"It's coming from the bedroom," I reasoned, running down the hall and opening the door.

A middle-aged man was lying on the ground clutching his chest. His face was deathly pale, and his eyes were bloodshot.

"Jackson!" Dr. Newman hastily knelt beside the afflicted man and checked his vital signs. "This is bad. Red, go get your medicine box."

"Got it."

I dashed back to the clinic, hurriedly shoved all the curatives I had just set out back into their container, and headed back to the action. Upon my return, I discovered Dr. Newman cutting through Jackson's clothes with a knife while checking for a pulse.

"Something's wrong with his heart." Dr. Newman positioned Jackson to make sure the man's airway was clear as well as to have him ready to receive resuscitative breathing if the need arose. Without knowing a definite cause, however, Dr. Newman was at a loss on how to treat the condition.

"Use this." I handed the physician a powder made from gray starfish grass. It was a medicine for counteracting poisons. It adhered to the poison flowing in the bloodstream and neutralized it. This allowed the body to expel the resulting compound.

"You know these symptoms?" Dr. Newman asked.

"Enough to mitigate them, anyway. I've progressed First Aid to mastery," I explained.

The common skill First Aid was mostly just a worse version of the Healing skills that were innate for doctors and the like. Mastery of it granted a skill called On the Spot Diagnosis. It had an effect on par with the Ultimate Healing skill. Even without knowing the cause of something, it granted you the knowledge needed to handle the symptoms. Admittedly, On the Spot Diagnosis didn't give you the ability to treat in and of itself, but it did allow you to relieve pain, staunch bleeding, and temporarily stabilize dangerous conditions. It was quite useful for buying time until a patient could receive proper curative medical techniques or healing magic.

Dr. Newman looked stunned for a moment but quickly recovered, receiving the offered powder with a nod. While he was treating Jackson, I looked around to see if anything nearby could indicate what might have caused this. Almost immediately, my eyes were drawn to a square sheet of paper lying on the floor. When I touched it, I noticed a slight trace of some kind of particles left on it.

"Some kind of compound?"

Anyone with an Herbalist or Alchemist blessing would have been able to identify the substance by licking a tiny bit of the stuff, but I

didn't have any such capability.

"Dr. Newman, this was lying over here," I said as I showed him the paper.

"This is...! Red help me get this man to the clinic!"

"So long as you're sure it's okay to move him!"

Without an actual stretcher, we had to make one with our arms. I held Jackson's upper body while Dr. Newman hoisted his legs into the air. As fast as we could manage, we carried the ailing man back to the clinic.

"Move aside! Move aside!" I called to the onlookers to clear our path.

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After a little while, Jackson finally voided the contents of his stomach and seemed to look much better for it. He was breathing properly on his own again, though it still looked a bit pained. Dr. Newman carried the bag of vomitus into the exam room with a serious look. The receptionist girl had a worried expression on her face as she did everything she could to assist the physician.

"He's not out of the woods yet, but we're at least through the worst of it," Dr. Newman said, letting out a long sigh.

"What's the cause?" I inquired.

"Looks like it's been making the rounds lately," Dr. Newman replied cryptically. When I tilted my head a bit in confusion, he showed me the paper I had picked up. "It's a powerful sedative. Remember that medicine that was approved not too long ago? The one that turned out to be a narcotic? That's what we've got here. I heard authorities are trying to regulate it, but apparently, it's become pretty widespread."

I remembered all the trouble I'd gone through trying to get approval for my anesthetic.

"In other words, this is an overdose," I surmised.

"Some other Zoltan doctors and I are currently working out the specifics of the symptoms and how to deal with them, but I never would've thought to use gray starfish. Would you mind if I shared that tidbit with the other clinics?"

Obviously, more people being equipped to help treat cases like Jackson's wasn't a bad thing, but I was worried about folks knowing I was the one who came up with it. Simply telling Dr. Newman to take credit for the idea felt a bit too unnatural. As I considered my options, I reasoned that such an accomplishment on my part wasn't likely to be enough to reveal my secret identity. If I told everyone that my blessing only had access up to Intermediate Preparation and that I

didn't have access to anything other than First Aid for determining symptoms, most people were unlikely to press further.

"That's fine with me," I said in answer to the physician's question.

Jackson was still unconscious, but I had my shop to take care of, too, so I decided to head back.

"It was fortunate that you were here, Red." Dr. Newman bowed his head in thanks. "I've got a bad feeling we might be seeing a few more cases like this as addictions grow more demanding among the drug's users. I'd appreciate it if you prepared some more of the medicine for it."

"Understood. I've got gray starfish grass growing in my herb garden, so there's still plenty to go around. If you start running low, just let me know."

"That's reassuring."

A narcotic. Who could've brought such a thing to Zoltan? I wondered. It seemed doubtful I'd ever deduce such a thing on my own, however.

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"You're late!"

I got an earful from Rit when I returned to the shop.

"I'm huuungry!" she moaned.

Now that I had a chance to think about it, I realized that noon had already come and gone.

"Sorry, there was a bit of an incident," I explained.

"An incident? You weren't just slacking off?"

"You remember that story about a narcotic when we went to get my new medicine approved? While I was at Dr. Newman's clinic, someone nearby had collapsed from an overdose. I was helping make sure the man was okay."

"I see. Overdoses already. That's a pretty dangerous drug."

"It's hard to say. It might just be someone who happened to be particularly susceptible to the stuff's effects. Dr. Newman thinks that we could have more cases in the near future, though, so he's asked me to prepare some more medicine for it," I said as I went to wash my hands and start cooking. "I need to go to the market before evening, so watch the shop while I'm out."

"Got it. Also, I want an omelet for lunch," Rit replied.

"I think there's some premade tomato sauce left. It shouldn't take too long to make omelets."

"Hooray!"

Back when I was traveling, I always kept some eggs in my item box. They were nutritious, and there were all sorts of ways to prepare them. They could be the main dish, a side, or even used as part of a

sauce.

Picking up an egg, I began to wonder how best to cook Rit's omelet. Whether someone liked a softer one or one that had been cooked a bit more came down to a matter of preference. I generally preferred those with a brown and crispy exterior. There was also the predicament of what to fill it with. Would Rit prefer the ground beef, nuts, and green onions mixed in before cooking? Admittedly, it would likely taste good either way, but I usually made mine by adding in ingredients during the cooking.

"How does she like it, though?" I muttered aloud. Someone else eating with me sure created a lot of new questions.

Maybe I should just ask her? I thought.

Still holding the egg, and after having considered my options, I ended up just getting started on lunch without going back to ask Rit. My decision was to let her try omelets the way I thought they tasted best first.

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I spread some red tomato sauce across the top of the crisp outside of an omelet and then sprinkled a bit of basil powder over that. As for sides, I'd prepared two sausages each, some herbal soup, and a bit of bread.

Rit took an eager bite, and her mouth immediately spread into a smile as she proceeded to wolf it all down. Lunch was late, so she'd doubtlessly been famished. Her spoon flew back and forth between the plate and her mouth with a very unrefined sort of momentum. Before I knew it, I was grinning myself. Turning to my own meal, I said, "I guess it is pretty good."

Curiously, the food tasted a lot better than when I'd sampled it back in the kitchen. Maybe it was because there was someone in front of me partaking of it so eagerly.

"I'm going to head up into the mountains a bit tomorrow," I said.

"For medicinal herbs? We still have a nice stockpile," Rit replied.

"Gray starfish grass is used in the medicine for treating the narcotic overdoses. We still have some in storage, and there's a bit growing in the garden, too, but I was thinking of increasing our supply just a bit more," I explained.

"Okay. Are you going to camp out?" Rit inquired.

"I'll stay up there for a night, yeah. Gray starfish grass grows here and there around fallen trees instead of together in clumps, so it takes time to gather it."

"Got it. You can rest easy knowing I'm watching the shop."

"If anyone needs a remedy for an overdose, give them the one on

the third shelf.”

“Got it.”

“Also... Let’s take a day off after I get back.” It was a slightly cooler autumn breeze sailing through the open window that prompted that suggestion. “Maybe the two of us could go for a swim in the river, have a barbecue on the riverbank, and just relax.”

“Just the two of us?!” Rit exclaimed.

“Yeah, just the two of us,” I affirmed.

“Okay, then let’s hurry up and get everything in order,” Rit replied.

I wanted to relax and go for a swim before it got too cold to do so. In the back of my mind, I wondered if perhaps going on a vacation, even a little one, was a good idea so soon after a narcotics incident. The notion was quickly discarded, however. I was only an apothecary. Taking on some big undertaking to save the world, or even a town, was a bit outside my capability.

“Let’s forget about work and take it easy,” Rit said with a smile.

Perhaps she’d sensed what I was thinking.

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I hadn’t been up in the mountains for a while, but everything was still the same verdant shade it would’ve been in the middle of summer.

“Just give it up and act like it’s fall already.”

I shook my head at the sound of buzzing cicadas as I carved a path through the overgrown brush with my bronze sword. You had to travel off the roads and animal trails alike if you wanted to gather herbs. Braving the true, untamed heart of the mountains was the only way. It was pretty hard work and required constant vigilance against venomous snakes and other small, dangerous creatures that could bite at your legs.

“You’ve also got to watch out for monsters like this guy,” I whispered to myself.

A moss pit at my feet bubbled, and a lichen-covered tentacle stretched out toward me. I immediately leaped back, avoiding the monster’s slow attack.

“A giant amoeba, huh?”

Such beings were also known as lesser slimes. Amoebas were similar to slimes but were technically a different species. Their comparable appearance often meant they were treated the same as slimes by many adventurers, however. The difference was that giant amoeba were frailer and could be cut by swords and other physical implements. Referring to them as lesser slimes was meant as an insult.

With a quick slash, I slew the viscous thing slowly creeping

toward me. Monsters of such a low level didn't advance my blessing, however.

There were a lot of different kinds of monsters and animals to be found in the mountains. There were those that would attack immediately, others that stalked and only struck at opportune moments, and even some that ran away only to return with reinforcements a few moments later.

Nestled in the deepest forests of the peaks was a chimera breeding ground, a possible leftover from the ancient era of the elves. You could also find stray trolls and gugs, a species of giant, that'd wandered over from the Wall at the End of the World.

Untouched by civilized hands for ages, such untamed places provided scores of medicinal herbs and wild plants to gather. With such dangerous monsters roaming about them, however, rookie adventurers had to steer clear on fear of death—perilous regions like those tested your survival and pathfinding abilities.

The reason that E-rank adventurers could only take jobs from the guild was so the guild could be sure that they were learning those vital techniques. While there wasn't a test to become an adventurer, you could say that a first quest was kind of like an exam to see who was cut out for that line of work.

I had nothing to fear from any chimera, though. They were a pretty absurd sort of monster. Essentially, they were lions with two extra heads, one of a goat and one of a dragon. All three were capable of attacking independently, and the dragon's breath could be particularly troublesome for the unprepared. One might think such frightening things would be avoided, but chimeras were actually sought after by many. A lot of adventurers saw them as dragon-slaying practice. Supposedly, the goat portion of the creature could actually be quite friendly. A captured young chimera could go for as much as around five thousand payril.

It just so happened that I was headed to the chimera breeding ground. If you wanted to gather gray starfish grass as efficiently as possible, that was the best place. On a previous excursion of mine, I'd discovered the ruins of ancient elf structures being overtaken by trees. This provided a lot of dark, damp areas where gray starfish grass loved to grow.

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Every time I'd come to this area in the past, chimeras had attacked me. After they suffered a few sound defeats, however, they eventually began to leave me alone.

During their last attack, ten of them had ambushed me all at once,

as if they'd planned it. That had caught me off guard and wound up being a pretty tough fight. The battle had left me with more than a few wounds, but ever since then, any chimera that caught sight of me merely turned away and left. They'd become so wary of me that if one tried to approach, another would actually chase it away.

Such a scene was something that surely would've startled most people, but to me, it'd become fairly regular. What did catch my eye, however, was the startling presence of another person this deep in the mountains.

It was a short young woman. *Probably a new adventurer*, I thought. Whether she didn't know the danger of the area or she'd gotten lost, I couldn't say, but I'd stumbled upon her just before she'd been set upon by the local monsters. Turning my back on her would've been a bit cold, so I approached and simultaneously drove off the creatures stalking her.

"Um, what's your name?!" she asked, looking up at me with sparkling eyes.

"..."

"Ah, sorry, I should introduce myself first! My name is Alice!" This girl carried with her a large scythe that seemed at odds with her more diminutive stature. It was a pretty distinct look for a rookie. Deciding I'd done my part, I made my escape.

"Wha—?"

By activating my lightning speed, I sped away from the hapless young woman in the blink of an eye. If anyone asked, I was content to insist that it was a mountain spirit that'd saved her. Getting involved with some fresh-faced adventurer girl wasn't my speed. I was aiming for a slow and easy life. Experience had taught me that extra caution was required around adventurers with odd equipment like her.

Something told me that Alice person was almost certainly wrapped up in all sorts of troublesome things. My hasty escape should've ensured she never had the chance to drag me into them.

A crow cawed overhead as if laughing at the sight. I suppose seeing me flee from a girl after I chased off a pack of chimeras would have been quite an unusual scene.

Sometime later...

"That has to have been what they call a 'Tengu demon' in the Far East. Not all demons in the East are evil. Apparently some even help people who get lost in the mountains."

"Mr. Tengu Demon..."

In passing, I happened to hear there was an adventurer in town telling some strange story about a Tengu demon in the mountains.

Rather naively, I assumed it had nothing to do with me.



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On the day following the incident with Alice, I checked a few spots where blood needles usually grew before heading back down the mountain.

The area that had been burned to the ground was already covered in new green. That owlbear's corpse had been consumed by scavenging creatures that left no trace.

"Seems like things will be back to normal by next year," I surmised.

There was even a possibility of a surplus of blood needles. The apparent overwhelming fertility of the torched section of the woods gave me a good feeling.

Looks like I'll have my hands full gathering plants next year.

As I made my way along the path back home, I passed a goblin wearing an expensive wedding dress and holding a kitchen knife. It sang to itself as I passed it by, doing my best to ignore it.

I also discovered a knight barring the way across a bridge, so I took the long way around. On that detour, I ran into a shady-looking man screaming that he wanted me to recover certain valuables left behind in a mage's mansion. I turned him down and suggested he take his request to the Adventurers Guild.

"There's been a lot of weird people around today..."

For an adventurer, the discovery of such unusual quest-starting events would've set the heart racing. I, however, already had plans for tomorrow.

Upon my return home, I could hear footsteps before I'd even opened the front door.

"I'm back," I said.

"Welcome home!" Rit exclaimed with a smile.

See what I mean? I didn't have the time to go on any sort of strange undertakings.

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The next morning, Rit and I left a note on the shop's door with the words *Closed for the Day* written on it.

"All right, let's go swimming!" Rit declared.

"Yeah!" I said in agreement.

"Did you bring the cooler?"

"Yep!"

“What’s in it?!”

“Some meat and vegetables. Wine and beer, too!”

A stray thought surfaced in my mind, and I wondered if all those weirdos I ran into the other day ended up finding anyone willing to indulge them.

Do your best, guys. I’m gonna be giving it my all at cooking this food and swimming in the river.

Rit and I rented some riding drakes and headed down the road side by side.

It had been a while since I had ridden such a creature. Drakes were the most common dragon species on the continent. Wyverns were also a type of drake: poison-tail drakes. What differentiated these scaly things from other draconic species were the number of legs. Dragons had four legs and a set of wings. Drakes sported a pair of wings, too, but only had two legs. In terms of intelligence, they were similar to normal beasts, so many were trained to be ridden.

Riding drakes were the result of selective breeding. Those with smaller, less powerful wings and more capable legs were chosen. The dark brown, sparkling scales of the lizard-like monsters were soft and warm. Their eyelids had developed to protect their eyes from any harsh sun, wind, or snow, ensuring that the fast-footed creatures could keep up the pace in almost any inclement weather.

The one downside was that it cost money to feed them. Riding drakes were carnivorous and ate three times as much as horses.

Every large town had a rental shop run by the government. All that was required to rent one was proof you were a local and a one-hundred-payril deposit. You could reclaim that down payment, though, minus the three-quarter-payril-per-day rental fee.

“Riding drakes are just the best!” Rit shouted.

The reason to go out of your way and choose drakes when horses were so much cheaper was to enjoy this feeling of the wind in your face. With such weak wings, the creatures were incapable of flight, but the appendages still caught the wind and gave the things a sort of leaping gait. It was a pleasant sensation that was difficult to come by with other mounts, so there were more than a few people who would rent a riding drake just for the sake of that experience.

That’s not to say they were everyone’s first choice. Some truly loved that powerful gallop of a horse, and there were others who couldn’t get enough of riding geckos and their ability to run along the ground, walls, and ceilings. Mounted travel was a major hobby among the wealthy.

A strong breeze rushed by, and our drakes hopped up into the air.

“Yahooooooooooooo!!!” Rit shouted, and I couldn’t help but join in her cheer.

When our mounts lowered their heads and spread their lustrous wings, they could leap over nine meters in the air. There was hardly any impact when they landed, either. These two drakes had Warrior blessings, so even though their levels were low because they had few opportunities to fight, their physical stats were still on the higher end, making their jumps all the more exhilarating,

“Sorry for asking for something selfish like this!” Rit shouted.

“Don’t worry about it! It’s been a while since I rode a drake, but it’s more than worth the price for how refreshing it is! This is great!”

Our destination, a stream near the foot of the mountains, was about an hour away. The drakes roared, delighted at being able to really cut loose as we spurred them on. We wouldn’t be able to keep this pace the whole way, but it was fun to enjoy it while we could.

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I happened to glance up just in time to catch a pair of pegasi spreading their wings and galloping comfortably across the sky.

“A pair, huh? I guess it’s about time for their mating season.”

The winged horses circled intimately with each other, each one’s large set of white wings spread wide. Pegasi were known to be gentle monsters. Hunting them was prohibited in most places. While they weren’t as powerful as owlbeats, pegasi had the leg strength to kill the average creature with a single kick, so they’d made homes for themselves in a great many locations across Avalon. Supposedly, their numbers were dwindling on the dark continent due to overhunting, though.

“Sorry to keep you waiting! Let’s go swimming!”

Rit was wearing a halter-top bikini that tied behind her neck instead of over her shoulders. Her large bust was normally hidden beneath her clothes, but now it bounced with every step. I was at a bit of a loss for where to rest my eyes. Moving behind Rit proved dangerous as well. I had a clear view of her back and its well-toned muscles. My eyes moved downward to...

Suddenly, Rit turned around to face me as I was in the middle of checking her out.

“Hee-hee,” she giggled wholeheartedly as she covered her mouth. Perhaps she’d noticed where my gaze had been headed.

We decided to take a dip before setting up for our little barbecue. Rit pulled a small tent out of her item box, and we took turns using it to change.

I won’t deny imagining the two of us changing together with our backs to each other, but there’s nothing wrong with that. Such a thing was perfectly normal to consider.

I might be getting way more excited about this than I expected. Admittedly, it felt a bit out of character, but I was grinning from the moment Rit took my hand and pulled me into the water. We both let out a yelp at how cold it was at first, but soon enough, we were splashing at each other like children.

No doubt, Rit noticed my expression, but she was wearing a similar sort of face that left her in no position to tease.

"It's about time we started getting lunch ready," I said after a while.

"Okay," Rit replied.

I offered my hand to help Rit out of the river. She looked just a little bit surprised but thanked me and took it anyway.

Most people associated knights and romance pretty closely. In all the old stories about them, there was always some princess that needed to be saved, a talented woman who helped the knight on his journey, and an evil witch who was defeated and became an ally.

I'd never experienced anything like that during my tenure as a knight. No one had ever mentioned anything like that happening to them, either. My point is that I was conscripted as a knight from a young age and then went on to join Ruti's party when she left our village, so I had absolutely zero experience when it came to love.

Admittedly, I did get a few propositions back when I was second-in-command of the knights, but I'd known since I was a child that Ruti had the Hero's blessing and that I would end up setting out with her on her journey when the time came. As such, I didn't have any time to be thinking about romance. I was focused on establishing and maintaining relationships with powerful people who might support us and saving up money so that there wouldn't be any issues when Ruti left home.

At the time, it'd been the right decision. Unfortunately, it left me in a bit of a tough spot with Rit.

I have no clue what to talk about...

Rit and I sat next to each other, drinking wine and eating the meat and vegetables we'd cooked. At first, we'd just been making light conversation, but both of us got fairly self-conscious after an awkward silence settled in. We ended up quietly sipping at wine.

When I glanced over, Rit, having apparently been thinking something along the same lines as I was, turned at the same time. We ended up looking straight into each other's eyes. Blushing, the two of us hastily looked away.

"...Heh...ha-ha."

"...Hee-hee..."

"“Ah-ha-ha-ha-ha...!””

Suddenly, we both burst out laughing. Even children would've

done better at socializing.

"I would've figured you were more used to this sort of thing, Rit."

"Why? Is that how I seem to you?"

"I didn't mean it like that. It's just, back when you first came to my shop, you were really aggressive, is all."

"At the time, it was all I could do to keep myself from panicking. 'What if he says no? What if he doesn't remember me?' I would have thought you'd be a bit more experienced, though."

"What gave you that idea?"

"You always stay so calm and collected, even when I try my best to get your attention. It felt like you saw me as a kid who was pushing herself too far or something."

"That was just because I thought I would look lame if I seemed too head over heels."

After finally opening up a bit, the two of us laughed together as we shared our feelings. I leaned in a bit toward Rit, and she got a little closer to me, until our bare shoulders were touching.

"Should I open another bottle of wine? Or do you want to swim some more?" I asked.

"Hmm... Let's just stay like this a bit longer," Rit decided.

"Yeah... That sounds good. Let's do that."

Evidently, both of us were at level 1 when it came to love. All it took to satisfy us was our shoulders touching, our hands overlapping, the warmth of the other's body. Not that there was anything wrong with simpler stuff like that.

"But..." Rit cut in.

"Hmm?" I glanced over at her.

Rit's face was suddenly right in front of mine, and she inched ever so slightly closer. Something soft pressed against my lips. We stayed like that for a little while before finally shifting back.

"I wanted to at least do that much..." Rit cast her eyes down to the ground as she covered her mouth with her hand. She was just so irresistibly cute that before I realized it, I was holding her close to me.

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By the next day, our vacation was over and we were back to the usual routine.

"All right, let's get to work," I announced vigorously.

"There's nothing wrong with enthusiasm, but we don't really have anything to do, either," Rit said with a bit of a wry smile.

She wasn't wrong.

"Apothecaries sure have a lot of free time on their hands."

"Yep, it's the opposite of a business focused on small margins and

volume. Though it's not as extreme as Stormy, where just making a single piece of furniture can take a long time. Plus, we don't have to do all that record-keeping like Dr. Newman," I remarked.

All we needed were a few orders a day to turn a profit. What's more, that could be supplemented with regular purchases from the various hospitals and clinics that Dr. Newman introduced us to, so money wasn't an issue.

"Oh yeah, what about your anesthetic?" Rit asked.

"I was planning to give a few samples to some of the local physicians along with a bit of documentation explaining it," I detailed.

"It's a new drug, though, so it will take some time to get approved," Rit observed. "What about the medicine for neutralizing that narcotic?"

"There hasn't been any movement there yet. There wasn't an increase in orders while you were watching the shop, right?"

"Nope. Aside from the incident you helped with, there's only been one other overdose case so far," Rit informed me.

So there was another case.

"But the drug itself has become pretty popular if the rumors I'm hearing from other adventurers are anything to go by," Rit concluded.

The foul substance's use wasn't isolated to Zoltan, either. The word was that the narcotic was spreading like a plague from one city to the next.

In times of war, there was no end to those who relied on medicine to treat their pain. In proper dosages, such substances were harmless, but when used to get through battles lasting days on end, people could get addicted and end up desperate for more even when they didn't need it. Addiction among retired adventurers was viewed as a very real problem, even in the capital.

"By the way, what does that drug do, exactly?" I inquired.

"The application for approval indicated an anesthetic pain relief usage like your medicine, but by taking three times the standard dosage, it evokes a feeling of euphoria apparently," Rit explained.

The young woman was extremely well informed, as one would've expected of a B-rank adventurer. She'd probably only done a little digging in her spare time but had managed to turn up some pretty detailed information.

"Also, it didn't really make any sense when I heard it, but...they said that it let you become a new version of yourself," Rit added after a moment.

"A new version of yourself? Aside from the feeling of euphoria?" I asked.

"Yeah, the salesman apparently emphasized the new-self part."

A narcotic that lets you become a new you? What the heck does that

mean?

“Is it a magic potion? No, if it was, it’d have to be a liquid,” Rit wondered aloud.

Magic potions only re-created the effects of existing spells, anyhow. Each and every one required a mage to cast the enchantment in order to make a potion out of it, making that sort of concoction difficult to produce. Preparing a large stock beforehand in order to sell it all at once didn’t really fit the model here, either.

“A potion wouldn’t be treated as a new medicine in the first place, so it wouldn’t even need approval,” I corrected.

It had to be a compound that derived an effect from medicinal herbs like the ones I made. I had no clue what about it entailed becoming a new version of yourself, however.

“Maybe it’s derived from some wild elf narcotic?” Rit proposed.

“No chance. If there was some kind of major discovery like that, they’d be doing it somewhere they could make more money off it—not here in Zoltan. You could make a fortune just taking it to the Alchemists Guild and selling the discovery to them,” I said.

Wild elves resided deep in the mountains and rejected the norms of standard civilization. Apparently, their kind existed even back when the wood elves were still around. Some scholars believed them to be directly related to the ancient elves.

Only on one occasion, a long time ago, had I ever found myself in a wild elf settlement. Much to my surprise, they slept in the open air like any other animal would’ve. Unsurprisingly of a people who lived in such a way, they were all totally naked, too. Despite such a lifestyle, they didn’t exude any body odors, and while they were by no means clean, they still looked beautiful. It was as though the vigorous energy they exuded was somehow enhanced by the dirt on their bodies. Elves were indeed an incredible species.

While not maintaining any written records, wild elves bore a wealth of knowledge that had been passed down orally throughout the generations. Just managing to bring back a fragment of that knowledge to normal society would’ve made anyone wealthy.

It wasn’t unreasonable to wonder whether this strange new drug that was going around might’ve had its origins in wild elf knowledge. The distributor going out of their way to sell it out in the frontier seemed almost counterintuitive, however.

“Maybe they sold it somewhere else and then got banished?” Rit proposed.

“Word certainly travels slower around here,” I admitted.

Eventually, we decided we’d dwelled on the subject long enough. It seemed unlikely that either of us was going to hit upon the answer.

Suddenly, there was a scream just outside the door, and a bloody

man flung himself into the shop and collapsed to the floor.

“Rit!”

With startling speed, Rit had already moved to gather up some medicine and bandages before I’d said anything. I calmed myself and approached the man.

“Are you okay? Here, let me take a look.”

The wounded person seemed to be trying to say something. Unfortunately, his body was spasming wildly, and he was unable to get the words out.

“Sedative!” Rit shouted as she tossed me a small vial. That sort of handling was probably not something an apothecary should’ve ever been doing, but there was no way a skilled adventurer like me or Rit would’ve missed catching the little thing.

I caught the bottle with my left hand while keeping the bloodied guest pinned to the ground with my right. Popping the lid off of the vial, I held the exposed contents beneath the man’s nose. His eyes drifted for a moment, and then he relaxed, as though strength were being sapped from his body.

“There we go,” I muttered.

I quickly examined his wounds. At a glance, he looked to have been hurt in three places by some kind of large weapon.

Not good; if we don’t do something quick, it’ll be too late...but whatever did this could be somewhere in town.

“Rit, get some bandages and a hemostatic to stop the bleeding. After that, could you grab your weapon and check out what’s happening outside?” I requested.

“Yeah, that’s not the kind of wound you get in an accident. Got it.”

Rit handed me what I’d asked for and then took her trusty shotels and headed outside on high alert.

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Leaving Red behind, Rit stepped outside and looked around the shop. There was no one around, but it was impossible not to hear the chorus of screams erupting from nearby. While Rit couldn’t tell for sure, she figured it couldn’t have been more than a block away. Chasing the sound, the young woman’s eyes picked up on what was likely a trail of blood left behind by the man who’d stumbled into the apothecary. Following the streaks of dried crimson, Rit turned a corner into an ally.

“Aaaaargh!” A screaming man fleeing in terror greeted Rit as she looked down the narrow street. Lowering her center of gravity, Rit leaped into the air, hurling herself right over the frightened man’s

head. Despite seeing such an acrobatic maneuver, the terrified man didn't waste any time beholding the sight and instead continued to flee.

Doesn't seem like a simple quarrel, Rit thought.

Rit knew enough from her time battling the demon lord's armies to recognize when someone was running for their life. She understood that there was no way the Asura demon Shisandan would be at the end of that little alleyway, but she clenched her weapons tight all the same.

Flying out of the alley, Rit saw that it was indeed not an Asura demon waiting for her. What did meet her eyes was just as unexpected, however.

There were six people lying bleeding on the ground. A couple were moaning as they tried to staunch the flow of blood, and at least one was clearly dead already as his head was split open. One of the wounded was a guard with a spear. His iron helmet sported deep dents, and he sprawled unmoving upon the ground with his face in a pool of blood.

The apparent assailants were three men. Each one held a bloody battle-ax loose in his hands and was chuckling eerily. Rit stared at the man in the middle.

"...You're the one with the Thief blessing with Albert's party, aren't you?" Rit remarked in a low voice.

While she did her best to hide it, Rit was surprised. Even if he was only a hanger-on, that thief was a member of Zoltan's strongest B-rank party.

"Rit. Rit. Riiiiiiiiiiiiit..."

It was immediately obvious that these three men were not in their right minds. Despite Rit's reputation as a powerful combatant, the trio approached without any hesitation. They were even gritting their teeth as if to try to intimidate.

"What's with you guys?"

Rit wasn't exactly the best of friends with members of Albert's party, but the thief was a fellow B-rank adventurer, and she'd chatted with him on a few occasions in the past. His name was Pick Campbell. He had a bit of a callous side to him but was definitely an adventurer with a respectable enough character.

This person closing in on Rit barely even resembled the Campbell she'd known previously, though. He looked closer to a wild monster than anything else. Raising his ax, Campbell started into a charge, but Rit didn't budge, content to ready her shotels and wait.

He's fast, and there's a sharpness to his movements. Is this how someone with a Thief blessing fights?

As the incensed man charged into range and brought his weapon

down, Rit took a single step forward. The ax caught nothing but empty air as the two passed each other. Campbell's arm slumped, and the battle-ax clattered to the ground. His body finally realizing it had been cut, a deep red stain spread across the man's clothes, and he collapsed. Startled, the other two readied their own axes.

Rit utilized the superhuman abilities that her Spirit Scout blessing granted her and closed the gap between her and her opponents with a single step while at the same time striking with one of her swords. There was a screeching sound of metal on metal.

"Nrgh."

One of the two remaining attackers had caught the shotel's blade with the shaft of his ax. Rit looked a little bit surprised, but with a flowing motion, she flipped the shotel's blade. The curved blade's tip moved past the battle-ax, and the cutting edge bit into his stomach. When she pulled the weapon back, the man collapsed to his knees, bleeding.

"Eeep!"

Curiously, the last of the three standing looked terrified, and he ran away. Whatever madness that'd possessed him seemed to have been dispelled like an illusion. Rit gave chase.

"Argh?!"

An arrow came flying out from the alley and pierced the escaping man's temple, pinning him against the wall of the building. There was no need to check—he was dead on the spot.

"Albert."

There was a ferocious glint to Rit's eyes as she glared down the street. Albert was standing there holding a crossbow, and beside him was Dr. Newman.

"My apologies. It seems my party member caused some trouble," Albert stated quietly.

"Albert, what's going on?"

"I don't know, either. I never would've thought Campbell to be the kind of man who'd do something this barbaric." Albert spoke with a tone that indicated he saw himself separate from this, even though one of his own party members had just died. "More importantly, wouldn't it be better to take care of the injured first?"

"Y-yes. Indeed," Dr. Newman said as he clutched his bag and scurried over to the people lying on the ground.

"It'd be best to get your fiancé to come, too. You can just send me the bill for whatever medicines we have to use." Albert's near death at Rit's hand the other day seemed like a distant thing as the pompous man spoke in the same self-assured way he always did.

Something about it did not sit right with Rit. The young woman's blessing began to needle at her mind, urging her to kill the perceived

enemy.

“A-anyway, I need to help the doctor out, so if you’ll excuse me.” Noticing the murderous intent welling up inside Rit, Albert hastily beat a retreat to Dr. Newman in order to escape her gaze.

“...”

Clang!

There was a loud metallic clatter. Startled, Albert spun around and looked to Rit in shock. She was standing there with her right hand outstretched, having opened her fingers and let the sword drop. A confused look crossed Albert’s face.

It was a ritual of sorts that Rit performed in order to retake control of herself when she was being assaulted by the urges of her blessing. Holding out her weapons, opening her hands, and letting the shotels drop to the ground helped her clear her mind.

Rit picked up the dropped sword with her left hand and slowly slid it back into its sheath.

“Haaah,” Rit let out a long exhale.

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Of the six people lying on the ground, two had seemingly died immediately. Two of the remaining four had slowly bled out and died. The remaining pair suffered heavy wounds but managed to escape with their lives.

Counting the one who fled into our shop, that made seven victims altogether. Three were half-elves and the other four were humans. It had been fortunate that Dr. Newman happened to be on his way to our shop when he ran across them. The survivors’ wounds had been brutal; if the doctor hadn’t come along, they would’ve joined the dead.

The guard, Arthur, who had bravely intervened and lost his life in the incident, received an official commendation from the Zoltan council. He was survived by a wife and two children. Apparently, they would receive a survivor’s pension to support them.

The young wife put up a brave front and said how proud she was of her husband, who courageously fought in order to give the townspeople time to escape, but her daughters cried enough for the courageous woman.

A B-rank adventurer going mad. It would have been a scandal for the Adventurers Guild no matter what, but with Rit half-retired, Albert’s party was in a special situation. Albert looked sorrowful as he apologized for his comrade’s misconduct, but no one doubted he would soon find a replacement and continue adventuring.

“Though it’s not like anything has really changed, either, I guess,” I mumbled after slipping the newspaper I’d been reading under my

arm. A week had passed now since the incident.

At last, a cool breeze had come to Zoltan. Other than the first real whisperings of autumn, little had changed, however.

“Who did the autopsy?” Rit asked, her head on my lap.

She seemed to have taken a liking to that spot lately, slipping into it whenever she saw an opening. Honestly, I kind of wished I could’ve been the one with my head on her lap.

“No clue. It didn’t say in the newspaper. Do you think him going wild was the result of some drug?” I posited.

“It’s gotta be... I mean, he was stronger than I would’ve guessed. The only way it could’ve been possible was if he used some kind of compound,” Rit replied.

“Oh?”

“I’ve seen Campbell move before. Even at his best, I don’t think you’d call him ‘strong.’ Back in that alley, though... He had a pressure to him that made it clearly a bad idea to cut in carelessly. And that other one... There’s no way someone who could parry my sword wouldn’t have made a pretty big name for himself in a place like Zoltan,” Rit explained.

“The other two were apparently C-rank adventurers who used to team up with Campbell way back in the day. They still got along well even after he joined up with Albert’s party. Given that sort of history, I never would’ve thought they’d be able to cross blades with you, even once,” I said.

“Right?”

Rit was the one who actually fought that mad trio; if she said they shouldn’t have been that strong, then there was no two ways about it.

Did they use some kind of enhancement potion?

“A blood test should reveal whatever medicine they might have taken, right?” Rit inquired.

“If there’s a medicine to compare against and someone with the skill to do the analysis. I’m more curious why someone with a Thief blessing was using an ax, though,” I admitted.

“Yeah, people like that definitely prefer lighter weapons. Something like an ax wouldn’t work with most of the innate skills provided by a Thief blessing,” Rit agreed.

That’s why it was so confusing that Campbell had been using an ax. I mean, if he didn’t have any other weapons available in that moment, then it made enough sense.

“It doesn’t sound like a situation where he was cornered and didn’t have any other armaments on hand,” I remarked.

“He wielded that ax pretty handily, too. It wasn’t the movement of someone who frantically grabbed the first thing he saw,” Rit added.

The mysteries kept piling up.

“Do you want to take a serious look into it?” Rit asked as she looked up at me.

“...Hmm...”

Murder had happened right outside our shop. There were a lot of things about it that didn’t make any sense. Something told me there was more to the incident, too.

“What do you want to do, Rit?”

“I want to go to sleep like this,” she said before closing her eyes with her head still on my lap.

“...Hmm.” I caressed her hair softly as I considered what I wanted to do.

Ah, that’s why this feels familiar. Sitting with Rit resting on my lap reminded me of when I was a knight in training and my roommate had a cat.

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The front door swung open, and the bell attached to it sang a little chime.

“Big bro! We came by to play!”

“U-um, hello, sir.”

Right around when I was thinking of starting lunch, a pair of half-elf kids, Tanta and Al, strolled in.

“Hey, guys, nice timing. I was just thinking of making some lunch. Do you want some, too?”

“Yeah!”

“I-if it’s no trouble for you.”

“You can worry about stuff like that once you’re grown up. It won’t take long, so just wait a couple minutes.”

I showed them into the living room area. Rit was out in the garden practicing her swordsmanship. Doubtless, she’d be back before long.

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“Oooh, spaghetti with a ragù sauce!”

“It’s a favorite of mine, too.”

Both Tanta and Rit were visibly excited at the sight of the dish. Al seemed a bit awkward at first, but he loosened up as he started to eat. The way his eyes gleamed when I said, “There’s more than enough for seconds,” really made the young half-elf seem quite endearing.

“Then I’ll have seconds!” Rit called out immediately, perhaps to make it okay for Al and Tanta to do the same without feeling guilty or

awkward.

“An extra-large serving, please!” Rit added.

Yeah... It was definitely for the kids’ sake... Right?

Al looked totally content as he patted his stomach after finishing. I’d had a hunch that it was a good idea to make a bit more lunch than I first thought. Apparently, I’d been right on the money.

“That was delicious,” Tanta praised.

“And I get to eat like this every day.”

For some reason, Rit seemed quite proud of that fact. Tanta merely replied with a frustrated look.

“That’s just how she gets sometimes. She can be pretty unreasonable,” I said with a laugh. “But...”

“But...?” Rit urged.

“That’s also what’s cute about you,” I finished.

“Just get a room already!” Now Tanta turned a displeased expression at me.

Even I could tell my feelings for Rit were starting to slip out a bit more these days.

Tanta heaved an impressive sigh. “You think we’re just getting in their way, Al?”

“Ah-ha-ha,” the other young half-elf laughed in reply.

I placed some tea and cookies on the table as we joked around and chatted playfully.

“Oh yeah, I made contact with my blessing yesterday,” Al admitted.

“Yeah? How are you doing?” I asked.

“I’m still a little worried...but there haven’t really been any impulses to speak of yet. Just this vague sort of jitteriness.”

“It’s probably because you haven’t decided what kind of weapon you want to master. That’s why you’re feeling a more general unease instead of having powerful urges,” I explained.

“Then if I just stay like this, I can still be myself?” Al reasoned.

Still worried about the blessing’s urges, huh?

“But always having that sort of unrest would be pretty rough. And you wouldn’t be able to access any of the skills from your blessing, either. It would be pretty inconvenient no matter what you end up doing with your life,” I explained.

“Can I not just get by living off common skills...?” Al pressed.

I was at a loss for words at such a question. *Just getting by on nothing more than common skills. Hmm.*

“It’s not impossible, but it would be pretty hard,” I answered after a moment.

“I guess so. It would have been better if I had just gotten a Warrior blessing like my dad,” Al said.

Warrior was one of the most common blessings—and one of the weakest. The only innate skills it had merely increased physical prowess. It didn't have access to any special abilities at all. On the plus side, it didn't influence its bearers very much. It was the perfect blessing for someone who just wanted to be a normal person. In other words, Al felt more like being a regular guy than the sort of powerful fighter that a weapon master could've become.

"At the very least, you should pick something that's useful in more everyday sorts of situations," I suggested.

"A weapon useful in everyday situations?"

"What do you want to be when you grow up, Al?"

"Um, I don't really know. My dad just works at the harbor taking cargo off the ships."

Working down at the docks? In that case...

"What about a knife? You could cut the ropes holding cargo down quickly. You'd likely be able to cleave right through knots and bindings that others wouldn't be able to. A knife wouldn't be very strong as an actual weapon, though. You might consider a rope dart, too. That's a tool with a small metal blade, about fifteen centimeters long, on the end of the rope. If you master that, you'll naturally become proficient in dealing with ropes in general. For something completely different, what about a battle ladder? It's a ladder around one and a half meters tall that's used for sieging small forts and the like. The soldiers who carry them have weaved in some techniques for using them as a melee weapon, too. Compared to a normal ladder, it is a bit narrower, and in addition to swinging it like a club, they can also use it to trip up opponents. As you acquire new skills, you'd also get better at using ladders in order to do work in higher, hard-to-reach places."

Al didn't seem too keen on my explanations at first, but as I elaborated on some weirder, unusual weapons he'd never heard before, he slowly grew more interested until he started pestering me a bit for more.

"That's amazing! So monsters can make weapons, too?!"

"They can, indeed. In addition to troll hammers, there are also goblin blades."

"Goblin blades?"

"As you know, goblins have small bodies, but they like big weapons. They really love using human-sized greatswords or battle-axes that are out of proportion to their frames. They don't have the body weight for such large things, though, so they can't really use them. To that end, they turned their usually empty brains to the task of figuring out how to swing heavier armaments, and what they came up with was the idea to make holes in the weapon in order to make it

lighter.”

“Wow...”

“That’s what we call a goblin blade. They generally put enough holes in the sword that it weighs around half of what it would’ve normally.”

“Wouldn’t that make the weapon break?”

“They definitely do break. In exchange for halving the weight, the weapons’ durability gets totally shot. You hear all sorts of funny stories about a goblin’s sword snapping in half in the middle of battle, and it’s just standing there looking confused as it gets killed.”

Al seemed to be enjoying our conversation. His interest in weapons was beating out his fears about his blessing.

“A weapon master only gets to choose the tool of his trade one time. Once you’ve decided, there’s no going back. So think long and hard about it,” I concluded.

“Yeah... Thank you, Mr. Red. Please teach me more again sometime,” Al said.

In truth, I wasn’t able to offer a young weapon master much advice beyond the basics. Still, I hoped Al would find a path he felt comfortable traveling.

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“Give me whatever gray starfish grass medicine you have!”

“I’m sorry, we’ve gotten orders from every other clinic as well, so we can’t do that. Would thirty doses work?”

“Oh, you have that much left?! You’re a lifesaver! Every other apothecary was sold out.”

The doctor from Christoff’s clinic in the residential area was overjoyed to be able to get his hands on some medicine. Only two months after Jackson’s overdose, it had reached a point where someone was getting carried into the hospital every day, and the gray starfish grass used for emergency treatment was flying off the shelves.

“Rit, watch the counter for me this afternoon. I’m going to prepare some more medicine.”

“Got it. Man, this has gotten bad.”

“Yeah. More than a drug, this stuff is basically poison.”

Narcotics were scary in their own right, with the impairment they caused gradually eating away at your body from the inside. The point of them was to experience a sense of euphoria and freedom. The extra damage to the body was just a side effect that accompanied the high. What was unusual about this particular narcotic was the amount of cases in such a short time. Even if it instilled heavy dependence and messed up the body, regular drug addiction didn’t put this many

people in the hospital this quickly.

“Why are they using such a dangerous medicine? Is it really that addictive?” Rit asked.

“No clue. Doctors have been asking the same thing, but the patients just kept talking about becoming a new person without really clarifying anything,” I replied.

“They said that thief in Albert’s party was using the drug, too,” Rit said.

“What?” I answered reflexively.

That tragedy was because of this stuff, too?

“Aren’t things kind of getting out of control?” I inquired.

“The council was talking about taking emergency action to ban it. They’ve stopped worrying about how it would look and have just started doing whatever they can. Dan, the guy who approved it, is probably going to be out of a job.”

That’s a shame. I made a note to bring Dan some stomach medicine.

“Still, no one knows anything about that stuff. Even after calling in someone with Advanced Preparation, they still couldn’t figure anything out. It might really be something from wild elves,” Rit explained.

There were probably no more than a handful of people on the continent with Ultimate Preparation. The only one I’d ever met in person was Baba Yaga, a witch who had come to Mzali, the silver town, searching for mithril. Baba Yaga was a legendary figure with a blessing in the Witch tree that had only been confirmed to have been held by one other person: the Winter Queen. Crafting skills, like Preparation, were not generally valued very highly because they didn’t have a direct influence on combat. Baba Yaga stood out because she was over level 60 and had accumulated tons of skill points.

“So it’s effectively impossible to determine what it is by using skills,” I surmised.

“Is there any way to analyze it other than Preparation?” asked Rit.

“Hmm, it’s a bit of a crude method, but if we knew the ingredients, that might provide a starting point.”

It was possible to research the base components and then use that knowledge in order to learn more about a compound, but it wasn’t the standard practice. What’s more, the information that could be gleaned from such an approach was limited. There weren’t many people who would go out of their way to research things in such a way when a skill existed that could just do it for them automatically.

“I’m going to have to go out and get more ingredients,” I said.

The Adventurers Guild had recently put out a request for gray starfish grass, but since it grew best in the chimera breeding ground, I

was probably the only one capable of gathering there. Albert and his party were likely the only group capable of beating the chimeras, and even then, it was only barely. There was no way they would take a quest like that just because the price of gray starfish grass had gone up a bit lately.

I had no intention of adventuring, but I was still going to do the best I could as an apothecary.

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“Um, Albert, sir. Are we really going to do this?”

“Are you really asking that after we’ve come this far?” Albert met the female monk’s murmur with a cold gaze, but the earth mage, the soldier, and the thief who was added to replace Campbell all had the same uneasy look on their faces.

“Why are we doing this?” the soldier muttered.

Albert resisted the urge to snap back at his party mate and instead urged them to follow along.

They were in a cave along the coast to the south of Zoltan. It was an area that monsters called scraggs inhabited. Scraggs were about four meters tall with rough blue skin and a beast-like face. They were a species of giant troll sometimes referred to as ocean trolls. While there was some variance, a single scrag was usually around level 9. Compared to more brutal trolls, scraggs tended not to be as indiscriminately violent.

“They look like someone squashed a monkey’s face, but they protect their tribe’s young like nothing else, to the point of not letting even one die of starvation,” the earth mage explained.

Scraggs could fish, but they also gathered supplies and food by pillaging. Normally, a scrag nest wasn’t much to worry about. When their mating season came and children started being born, however, they would attack nearby settlements in order to gather what they needed. As that cycle repeated for years on end, the monsters would gradually build a veritable kingdom for themselves.

“That’s why we’re clearing them out before their mating season starts,” Albert said.

“It’s just scraggs; can’t a C-rank party take care of it?” one of his fellows whined.

The creatures possessed a regenerative ability that even allowed them to reattach severed limbs. That factor was easily negated by fire, however. Just a single shot of Fireball—the classic first spell that everyone with some kind of Mage blessing learned at level 4—was enough to incapacitate most scraggs. Any of them that survived such an attack wouldn’t be able to heal themselves, so they quickly became

non-threats either way. As long as there was someone in the party with a blessing that had access to Fireball, the ocean trolls were not a particularly scary enemy. A weakness to something as common as fire was enough to make a monster dramatically less menacing.

“All the adventurers who lazed around in the summer months have their hands full dealing with the quests they put off, and scraggs aren’t particularly challenging until they enter their mating season. None of them would take a job like this during the creatures’ off season,” Albert explained.

What Albert conspicuously failed to mention was that clearing a well-established scrag nest was fairly profitable, since plundering monsters’ loot was a crucial source of income for adventurers.

“That’s why we’re doing it. Those with strength have a responsibility to wield it. The longer they rest their blade, the greater their sin,” declared Albert.

The rest of the party agreed, but contempt showed in their eyes. *Do it yourself!* they thought in secret.

Albert shook his head slightly. His blessing was that of the Champion, level 24. It was the blessing of one who overcame difficulty in order to accomplish great feats, and was also among the best Warrior blessings. Its impulses drove the bearer to demonstrate their strength to the world and accomplish things that would be remembered throughout history.

In the face of Albert’s grand ambitions, his comrades’ mediocre blessings were incomparably small. For Albert, such a thing was almost an affront to himself, even though he had not been able to live up to his own great blessing and had ended up drifting out to Zoltan.

“We should get going,” Albert said, drawing his weapon.

“Um, what is that sword?” the monk asked.

Albert was wielding a blade with an unusual shape. The object was thick and appeared rather heavy. There was hardly a crossguard to protect the wielder’s hands from getting cut, either. Most distinctive of all, however, was that the tip of the sword was rounded, making it useless for thrusting. It was the sort of weapon that an executioner might’ve used.



“Yeah, my old sword got broken. I thought it would be difficult to find another magic blade of that caliber, but I was lucky. I got this one at a good price from a traveling merchant.”

In stark contrast to Albert’s immaculately polished armor that gleamed like new, there were spots of rust on the strange sword he’d brought.

“It didn’t have a name, but its sharpness is exceptional. I call it the Vorpall Blade.”

The monk used Detect, a skill that allowed the user to view magic power. No sooner had she done so than she was overpowered by the intense aura emanating from Albert’s weapon and knocked to the ground.

“Sorry, I should have warned you sooner. While the maker is unknown, this is a masterpiece made using Legendary Weapon-Making. Only the Holy Demon Slayer that the Hero Ruti wields outclasses this blade. It possesses enough power that simply glimpsing it is too much for someone without a high level,” Albert explained.

“S-some traveling merchant had something like that?” the monk asked, still sitting on the ground.

Albert flashed a friendly smile as he reached out a hand to help the woman up.

“Guess I got lucky.”

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Albert’s party had already taken control of most of the nest that the scraggs had made out of a system of caverns. All that remained was the final chamber.

“Ah...,” the monk let out a little exclamation when she and the others first entered the last room.

In it were three scraggs. The visibly drooping breasts identified them all as female. What had caused the monk to gasp, however, was that two of the creatures were protecting the third, who was sitting on the ground with an enlarged stomach.

Any battle rage or blessing impulses the monk had been feeling were swept away upon beholding that sight. She was overcome with empathy for the monsters, who readied themselves to defend their pregnant kin.

“N-no way...” The monk faltered back a half step, her mind stuck at an impasse.

“So mating has already begun? We were right to take care of this early,” Albert said.

His voice was calm and cool as he charged forward, easily cutting

down the two scrag who tried to protect the parent and unborn child. The last living of the three let fly a battle cry for its fallen tribe and its baby. The sound was earsplitting.

The mother scrag swiped her claws at Albert, determined to fight to the last, but the adventurer didn't even sniff at the attack. With a single slash, Albert all too easily ended the life of the parent and her fetus.

The battle was over. Without her even realizing it, tears had started rolling down the monk's cheeks.

"Are you okay?" Albert asked soothingly, worried about his party member. He placed the same hand that had brought the mother scrag low on the monk's shoulder to comfort her.

"Why...?" As though on reflex, the monk began to verbalize the thoughts swirling about in her mind. "All they did was love their children! Just like us! No, they might have been even more noble than us!"

"Of course not. Monsters aren't capable of such things," Albert declared.

"You don't know that... What if there was a way to develop an arrangement where we provide them with food, and they hunt other monsters in the surrounding area?!" the monk cried.

Albert wore a smile like an adult about to explain the reality of the world to a child.

"That's not what our blessings wish for us."

Right... This world is consumed with conflict.

Chapter 2

The Smoldering Flames After the Storm

“All right, the storm shutters have been closed. We gathered all the herbs in the garden that looked like they might get blown away, and the ones left aren’t ready to be picked. At this point, if things go bad, it’s out of our hands,” I said.

“I took down the sign and everything else that looked like it could break,” Rit replied.

A storm had come to Zoltan. The tempest had risen out of the southern ocean and followed along the Wall at the Edge of the World up to the northwest. Downpours like this happened once every few years, though it was a bit rare for one to hit at the beginning of autumn.

“Okay, next is the washroom then!” I called.

The wind was already whipping outside. Dark, inky splotches covered the sky. It was only a matter of time before the downpour began.

“The forecast from the Ancient Mineral Dragon Weather Observatory said that the storm would start in earnest around sunset tomorrow, right?” Rit inquired.

“Yeah, the young mineral dragons have been flying around spreading the word,” I answered.

The greatest earth scientist on the continent of Avalon was a dragon. It was one of the four ancient dragons of light, Fuyu the ancient mineral dragon, whose body was made of black, glimmering mica. Fuyu had established the Ancient Mineral Dragon University, along with an observatory at the summit of Mount Highhelm.

Young mineral dragons, as well as humans and elves who desired to study the earth sciences, attended classes run by older mineral dragons who passed on their knowledge.

The Ancient Mineral Dragon Weather Observatory was one of the departments at the university. Its members studied the weather of the Avalon continent and would send warnings in advance of impending natural disasters. For Zoltan, which often found itself hammered by heavy storms, the reports were crucial. Whether you were working

ships or plowing fields, the skies were a key part of the job. Every nation on the continent supported the palace of scholarship that Fuyuran, both in the form of nonaggression pacts and pledges to come to its aid in the event of an emergency.

Mineral dragons were wise and enjoyed the study of the natural processes. Their scales were composed of mica, and those who weren't familiar with the species often confused them for stone dragons. Whenever such a misjudgment occurred, the wronged mineral dragon would emphatically correct the offender, saying, "Actually, I'm a mineral dragon." Then they would begin a lengthy lecture on the black gleam of their scales. To all four races of light dragons, the sheen of their scales was a source of pride.

With their many research posts stationed throughout the continent having been in operation for hundreds of years, most people were fairly familiar with mineral dragons, perhaps even as much as radiant dragons. Radiant dragons lived to help soon-to-be-heroes. When a young kid set out on their adventure, a radiant dragon would often transform into a human and render some assistance from behind the scenes. They loved to help children grow during their early quests. As such, they were a sort of dragon that people encountered surprisingly often. Though some more impolitic people occasionally wondered aloud why the creatures were so fond of little kids.

Back when I was a knight in training, I actually adventured with one for a bit. That's not to say my time with the dragon was always easy. Whenever it got happy about something, it would start singing, regardless of the situation or the mood of the moment. I was only a kid, but there were times when it felt like I was babysitting the thing. It was nice enough, though. If I remember right, it said its name was Al-Haytham.

Excluding mineral and radiant types, there were two other kinds of light dragons: steam dragons, mechanically minded creatures, and lightning dragons, the guardians of law.

The four races of dark dragons born on the dark continent included the nihilistic vacuum dragons, the destructive and entropic salt dragons, the child-abducting ash dragons, and the earth-corrupting dust dragons.

After elves and humans, dragons were considered the third most principle race on Avalon. Apparently, few of them resided in Zoltan. I'm sure it's because the region offers so little that would entice a dragon.

"Hey! Quit lollygagging and get back to work!" Rit chided.

Oops.

"The water system's unusable when storms come, so if we don't store up something to drink now...", I muttered.

The aqueduct drew water from the river, but before the tempests came, it had to be blocked off at the river to prevent an overflow of mud and avoid physical damage from surging currents. The well in town was likely to get muddy after a downpour, too, so that wouldn't be usable for a while, either.

While Zoltan usually had an abundance of water, storms could ironically cause shortages. That was why I was storing up the liquid in bags and barrels while the taps still worked. Everyone else in town was likely doing the same, as the water only came out at a trickling pace. It was a mind-numbingly slow and menial task to fill all of our containers.

"Weren't you the one who said we should finish everything up yesterday? Right before you went to go play around with Gonz?" Rit scolded.

"I mean, he invited me over..."

Gonz the carpenter was sure to be busy for weeks following the storm. He'd be running from one house to the next making repairs. In such times of need, even the laziest residents of Zoltan would pitch in to help with repairs and cleanup. Knowing that, whenever heavy precipitation approached, Gonz would take his days off in advance and go out to play around. He really ought to have thought about the example he was setting for Tanta!

"No one made you accept the offer!" Rit hopped onto my back as she complained about my having slacked off.

"Back to work! And put your back into it!" She slapped my butt like a jockey on a horse.

"As you wish, milady."

"Make sure you take good care of me to make up for not being around yesterday..."

"I got it. Not like there's anywhere to go tomorrow or the day after, what with the storm on its way."

Oops, started getting distracted there again for a moment.

Now vigilant, I did my best to work quickly and quietly as I felt the warmth of Rit's body clinging to me. Something about it was oddly nostalgic...

Oh right, that, I recalled.

A pretty big hurricane had hit my hometown when I was a kid. It wasn't nearly as bad as the ones that Zoltan experienced, but for the people in my village who weren't used to such weather, it was quite the panicked situation.

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On that day, the sky was black just like it was in Zoltan.

It was rare for squalls to hit the village, so there were a lot of homes that weren't sturdy enough to withstand the wind. Knowing this, everyone gathered at the agreed place of refuge, the village chief's house.

The wind howled, and there was the constant noise of things getting tossed around outside. Thunderclaps boomed like explosions, and children shrieked at the sound.

I was eight at the time, and my sister, Ruti, was six. Thanks to our special blessings, we were a fair bit more mature than the other children our age.

"Moouooooommy!" a little girl the same age as Ruti cried, clinging to her mother.

"A six-year-old shouldn't fall to tears at thunder," the parent chided, looking a little concerned about bothering everyone else. Even so, the woman still gently and reassuringly patted her daughter's head.

Ruti watched the two of them with the same sort of expression she usually wore. Most regarded it as a cold gaze, but that couldn't have been further from the truth. It was just hard to read her emotions, that was all. Ruti's gaze was fixed on that mother and child.

Looking around, I saw there were quite a few children clinging tightly to their parents or siblings in a similar way. Everyone was scared.

"Ruti."

"Yes?"

"Aren't you frightened?"

"...Of the storm or of the lightning? Are you asking if I'm worried there's a chance that this building will collapse and we'll all be crushed?"

I gently patted my little sister's head as she looked at me with her clear, untroubled red eyes and asked for clarification in a detached tone.

"Any of the above. Is there anything you're scared of at the moment?"

"No. Nothing scares me."

"*Nothing scares me.*" Ruti had gotten into a big fight after saying that same thing to a thirteen-year-old who happened to be the biggest bully in the town. Even though she had the blessing of the Hero, a hot-blooded level-3 soldier with a stick for a weapon, thick cloth armor, and a beaten-up old wooden shield was a bit much for Ruti. She still lacked both equipment and combat experience and was currently only level 1. The kid had roughed her up a bit.

Maybe the bully had thought it was an insult, but when Ruti said she wasn't afraid, she meant it in the most literal sense. Nothing could

scare her because she'd been born with Immunity to Fear.

It went without saying that I paid that bully back. I gave him just as much as he gave Ruti. Well, maybe it was 1.5 times... No, was it 2.2 times? Yeah, that sounds about right. Afterward, I had him apologize to my sister.

I ended up getting treated like the leader of all the kids in the village for a while after that. It quickly grew to be a pretty big pain to deal with, though, so I ordered an eleven-year-old boy with a Cavalier blessing to take over for me, and things went back to how they were before.

Apparently, that bully later turned over a new leaf and stopped resorting to violence to get his way. He hadn't been aggressive due to any particularly strong impulses from his blessing. Rather, it'd simply been because he'd never lost before.

"There's really nothing you're afraid of?" I asked.

"You know the answer already, Big Brother," Ruti said, tilting her head a bit.

"Yeah," I replied. I could tell from her expression that she didn't understand what the point of my question was. "The truth is, I am scared."

"Really?"

"Yep. Does that surprise you?"

Ruti looked a little bit troubled. Back then, she didn't have Immunity to Confusion yet. Perhaps that was why unexpected revelations could still catch her off guard.

"No."

"Really? That didn't surprise you, huh?"

"It didn't."

"Anyway, getting to the point, I'm scared, so...do you mind if I hold your hand?"

"My hand?"

"Yeah, your hand."

"Go ahead."

I clasped Ruti's palm against mine. No matter how immense a blessing she might've been born with, Ruti's hand was still just that of a little girl.

"Are you not scared anymore?" Ruti asked.

"Yep, I'm good now," I replied.

"Good."

Ruti smiled, though no one else really saw her expression change. Even our mom and dad had trouble recognizing Ruti's little shifts in demeanor. It was a shame. However, until the day came when someone else could see Ruti's smile, I was content to maintain a monopoly on it.

"Sorry, me being scared was actually a lie," I admitted.

"A lie?"

"I wasn't frightened at all."

"Oh." Ruti tilted her head again, now more confused than ever.

"I just wanted to hold hands with you is all."

"With me?"

"Would you rather not?"

"I don't mind, but why?"

"No reason."

"No reason?"

"Yep, even without a special purpose, there are times when I want to hold hands with you."

"...Why?"

"I can't explain it. That's just how people are. Sometimes they do things without any cause."

"They do things without any motive?"

"Right, there wasn't any unique purpose for why I held your hand. So if there's ever a time you want to hold my hand for no particular reason or anything like that, then feel free to do so."

"I see..." Ruti fixed her gaze on our hands. "Big Brother?"

"Yeah?"

"I love you."

That was rare. In fact, it might've been the first time I'd ever heard Ruti verbally express affection for anything.

"Thank you. That makes me happy," I said.

"Why?" Ruti inquired.

"Huh?"

"I'm the one who loves you, right? So why would you thank me?"

I gently brushed Ruti's hair. As it rustled, her brilliant blue locks gleamed in the torchlight.

"I love you, Ruti."

"Mm-hmm."

I had lost count of the number of times I'd told my sister that I loved her. The truth was, I could barely stand how cute my little sister was.

"See? When I say that to you, you smile, too," I pointed out.

Surprised, Ruti patted all around her face. That gesture was all too adorable, and I broke into a grin.

"If you're smiling, that means you're happy, right?" I asked.

"Probably," Ruti replied.

"It's the same with me. Hearing you say that you love me makes me happy. I'm smiling right now, aren't I?"

"Yeah."

"That's why I said thank you."

Ruti stewed over that exchange a bit, thinking carefully to be sure she understood it.

“Got it,” she declared after a moment.

“You understand?” I inquired.

“Big Brother, is it okay if I do something for no particular reason?”

“Go right ahead.”

Ruti suddenly let go of my hand.

Huh? I guess she didn't like holding hands?

To my surprise, however, Ruti moved behind me and jumped onto my back.

“I like this way more... Is that okay?” she asked.

“Sure, if that's all, then you can do it anytime you want.”

“Okay.” Ruti squeezed her arms around my neck a bit. I could feel the warmth of her body on my back.

“Big Brother?”

“What is it?” I turned my head to one side, and unsurprisingly, Ruti's face was right there in front of my nose.

“Thank you.”

Ruti flashed that full-faced smile that only I saw for what it was. It was such a cute grin that anyone able to really see it would've definitely fallen for her at first sight. I knew that whoever ended up marrying Ruti in the future was sure to be a lucky man. Admittedly, I was a bit jealous.

“Big Brother, will you stay with me forever?”

“...Sorry, I can't promise that.”

“Really?”

Once the storm passed, I was to set out for the town of Andar where the knight who'd scouted me was waiting. He was going to make me into a knight. The monsters near my village barely provided me with any growth. I had started seriously hunting at age six but had only managed to go from level 31 to level 33. Stuff like owlbears weren't cutting it anymore. I knew that I had to get much stronger if I was going to travel with Ruti when she set out on her journey.

Even as a kid, I had my doubts on how long I'd really be able to fight at my sister's side, but I wanted to be around long enough to ensure that she had a good party that would help her move forward on her own, at the very least. No matter what, I had to be prepared for anything, even a fight with the demon lord.

“But you know, Ruti, if there's ever anything you don't want to do, just ask me. I'll take care of it.”

“I know.”

“Oh, you knew that?”

“You've told me it a lot already.”

“I wouldn’t want you to forget.”

A small ear pressed up against my back, and Ruti suddenly went very still.

“I’ll return when I get some time off. Is there anything you want me to bring as a gift?”

“Warm milk and honey,” Ruti whispered as she clung to my body.

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The path of an adventurer on a journey to face the demon lord and that of one living the slow life in Zoltan couldn’t have been further from each other. Most might’ve thought such roads would never have crossed. However...

“Are you looking for Gideon?” a young man with black hair and a dark complexion asked Danan.

Danan wasn’t particularly skilled at tracking, so he’d had no end of trouble trying to locate any clues his former party member might’ve left behind. Currently, he was in a particularly foul mood and was drinking at the tavern in the town where Gideon had left the group.

“What’d ya say?” Nice and comfortably drunk, Danan glared at the young man who’d asked him the question. Often, Danan activated his Menacing Gaze skill without meaning to. Even faced with such a look, the young man appeared unperturbed, however.

“Say, you’re pretty strong!” Danan complimented.

“Not nearly as strong as you, but I know my way around a sword.”

“That right?”

“More importantly, you’re looking for Gideon, right?”

“What if I am? You know where he is or something?”

“No, not really. But I happen to be looking for him, too.”

“You are?”

Danan sobered up at that. He clenched his fists and glowered at the dark-haired young man, ready to brawl at the drop of a hat.

“Shall we search together? Doubtless, it should be more efficient.” Once again, the young man’s smile refused to budge in the slightest.

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By evening, the storm had finally hit. A strong wind was blowing outside. Rain flew parallel to the ground, pelting buildings with an almost wavelike cadence. In the blink of an eye, the tracks my boots left became overflowing puddles.

“No customers are going to come with the weather like this. Let’s

just close up.” I shut the door to the shop and locked it from the inside. I’d only opened it for a brief moment, but the floor was already soaked.

“Here you go,” Rit said, handing me a washcloth.

“Oh, thanks.”

I took it and started wiping the floor. While I was doing that, Rit double-checked the register for what little sales we had today. Neither task took long to complete.

“We can take tomorrow off. I’m sure we won’t get any customers,” I said.

“No one would be out walking around at a time like this,” Rit commented.

“Yeah,” I replied.

The wind picked up, whipping around the outside of the building. Thankfully, my shop was the work of Gonz, the best carpenter in the working-class part of town. As such, the foundation didn’t budge an inch. Rit and I settled in to wait out the rain.

Bang, bang! There came a loud thumping on the door.

“On a day like this?” I asked, surprised.

“Red! It’s me! Newman!”

“Dr. Newman?!”

Hurriedly opening the door, I was greeted by the sight of Dr. Newman garbed in a heavy cloak. He wasn’t alone, however. The old man was carrying someone on his back.

“Al?!” I exclaimed.

It was indeed. The boy was soaked to the bone, slumped over, and bleeding from his head. His bare feet were muddied and pale, likely due to a lack of blood flow from the cold.

“Rit, get blankets and towels!” I called.

“Got it!”

Rit had already started moving before I’d even asked for anything. She immediately brought what I’d requested. I set a blanket out on the floor of the shop and laid Al down on top of it. Rit used her spirit magic to get some hot water ready quickly while I wrapped Al’s body to warm him up.

Meanwhile, Dr. Newman took some disinfectant and a hemostatic to stop the bleeding from the medicine shelf and began to treat the wounded child.

“It’s deeper than I thought...,” the doctor murmured to himself.

The blood kept pouring from the wound on Al’s temple.

“This is bad.” I was watching from the side, but even I could tell how serious the injury was. There was no way that standard procedures were going to be enough.

“Give me a second,” I said and ran to the storage room. Quickly, I

snatched up five cure potions—concoctions that each contained the essence of a Cure spell. Wounds that could not be treated in time via standard methods could still be healed with magic.

These are a bit of a luxury for common folk, but they're just copies anyway.

They were cure potions I'd created with my multiplying potion. Selling them was out of the question, so they were best put to use for this sort of emergency. I rushed back to Al and used all five of them, one after another. Thankfully, Al's condition began to stabilize rather quickly.

"We made it in time." I let out a long exhale, relieved.

"You surprised me there. I never would've imagined you'd use a cure potion on him... I hate to admit it, but there's no way that Al's family will be able to pay for five of those potions..." Dr. Newman said.

"I'm well aware. He's a friend of mine, though," I replied.

"A friend, huh?"

"If you don't mind, could you keep it a secret that I used cure potions for this? Just say you did what you usually do," I requested.

"I understand. You're a good man, Red," Dr. Newman replied with a smile.

"What happened to him anyway?" I asked.

"I don't know. I was on my way back after getting a call from some fool who tried to repair a leaky roof in this weather and fell off. Al was collapsed on the side of the road as I passed by, in the exact same shape as when I brought him to you. Truthfully, I would've preferred not to impose, but this was closer to where I found him than my clinic, so I decided it was for the best. Sorry for causing such a ruckus."

"Not at all. Thank you for saving my friend. If you hadn't stumbled on him, Al probably would've died."

As his body started to warm back up, Al's face began to look more at ease.

"There were several stone fragments in the wound. Maybe he was pelted by a stone the wind had kicked up," Dr. Newman proposed.

"I see. I wonder what he was doing outside on a day like this, though, and walking around this part of town of all places. He's only wearing indoor clothes. What could've possessed him to go running outside without a poncho or shoes?" I wondered aloud.

"I have no idea," Dr. Newman answered.

"...I guess we have to wake him then," I decided.

Waking Al was not a great option, given how weak he undoubtedly was. I just couldn't shake the thought that something bad was going to happen if I didn't find out what'd occurred, though.

Gently, I nudged Al's shoulder and called his name a few times.

"Ngh..." After a few moments, the half-elf boy finally opened his eyes.

"Are you okay?" I asked.

"Mr. Red..." There was relief in Al's eyes, but the next moment, they shot open in terror, and the kid clutched at my arm.

"Ah! Aaaargh!" he screamed.

"What is it?!" I asked, frantic. "It's okay, Al. I'm right here. Calm down."

"P-please help!" cried the boy.

"You're safe now. This is my shop. No one will hurt you here," I told him.

"Not me!" Al shrieked. "My home! Ademi came...attacked Mom and Dad... He had an ax!" Al's throat clenched, terrified from the mere memory. His breathing tightened. Dr. Newman frantically tried to soothe the poor boy to get his respiration back to normal.

Ademi...that kid who picked a fight the first time we met? And wielding an ax? I don't know what's going on, but if I don't hurry...

"Here."

As I stood up, Rit called out from behind me. When I turned around, I saw she had brought a cloak and a bag with two Extra Cure potions.

"The cloak is mine. It's a shielding mantle made by high elves. It's got Environmental Resistance," she explained.

"Thank you," I said.

Immediately, I slipped the cloak over my shoulders, grabbed the bag, and dashed toward Al's house in the middle of the storm.

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Al's parents were injured but thankfully still alive.

By the time I reached their house in Southmarsh, the front door was wide open, and rain was blowing into the building. I passed through an entryway that may as well have been a moat. Their house was a simple one, with just a kitchen and bedroom, so it was an easy task to find its occupants.

Al's parents were collapsed in the bedroom. While they were still bleeding, the wounds didn't appear to have been made by an edged weapon. For some reason, Ademi had apparently used the butt of the ax instead of the cutting edge when he'd attacked them. The blood loss was bad, but the wounds themselves were relatively shallow. The Extra Cure potions Rit had given me weren't even necessary to stabilize the two.

I set to the task of cleaning the wounds and stopping the bleeding.

Then I gave them some painkillers and set their broken bones. Later, Dr. Newman arrived to confirm no serious complications I had missed.

The worst outcome had been avoided, of course, but I knew this incident was going to cause some serious problems down the line. Ademi was the son of the captain of the guard and lived on Council Street.

In the days that followed the attack on Al's family, Ademi very conspicuously disappeared. The half-elves and other demi-humans living in Southmarsh accused the guardsmen of concealing him somewhere, but no official response was ever given. The situation sat like embers that threatened to burst into a fire of discontent. Though the storm had passed, a greater unease now gripped the denizens of Zoltan.

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"Al, is there something you'd like for breakfast?" I asked.

"...Anything is fine with me," the boy replied.

"I can do cheese toast, egg toast, some fried white fish, bacon salad, pickled cabbage..."

My eyes studied Al's face as I listed off some meal options. There was a slight twitch when I mentioned scrambled eggs.

"Yeah, scrambled eggs sound good," I concluded. "Some boiled beans and the tomatoes we got from Tanta's family would pair well on the side. And a chicken soup to go with it."

"Thank you." Al's expression was still stiff, but there was a faint hint of anticipation for the food as well. I grinned and told Al to wait in the living room, then headed to the kitchen.

Recently, it'd been decided that Al would stay with Rit and I for a while. His parents had become the symbols of the protests going on in Southmarsh. As such, Bighawk, one of the top members of the Thieves Guild, was having them recover at his mansion in Southmarsh. A local doctor was handling their convalescence as well, instead of Dr. Newman.

"I can understand what those guys are saying; I mean, I did get pretty banged up, after all. But I don't want my son getting wrapped up in a place so consumed by hatred." That's what Al's father had said to me with his head lowered to the ground in a deep bow. He'd come to my door with a bag of forty-seven quarter payril, the entirety of his savings. Rit and I insisted that the man stand back up, and we agreed to look after Al for the time being.

"Good morning!"

Rit had woken up a bit late today. Her cheerful greeting earned little response from Al, but he did nod slightly in her direction. While

not much, it was a marked improvement over the first day of the boy's stay with us. He'd hardly said a single word when he'd first arrived.

Al's parents had been attacked right before his eyes, and the best he'd been able to do was turn tail and run. As if that hadn't been enough, he'd also been made to witness his neighbors berating and cursing out their fellow Zoltanis. Al was still just a child, and that was an experience more than traumatic enough to cause him to wall his heart off from the world.

"All right, it's ready," I called.

The scrambled eggs laid out on the table almost seemed to sparkle under the morning sunshine that shone through the window. I don't think it's an exaggeration to say that a significant part of what made eggs great was how visually pleasing they were.

"Thanks for the meal," Al muttered.

Rit was sitting beside me, while Al sat across from us. Together, the three of us began eating.

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"Thank you, Miss Rit."

Al and Rit were standing opposite each other in the lawn, wielding training shotels with dulled blades.

"Don't mention it. Come at me however you like."

Instead of her usual dual wielding, Rit was only holding a single shotel in her right hand. Her other hand was resting casually on her waist. Ready to practice her weapon above her head for a vertical strike, Rit posed a question to Al.

"Faced with an opponent who is more skilled than you and has taken a high stance...?"

"A mid-stance, attack from my left."

Al held his own weapon in his right hand at a middle stance and slowly shifted it to the left side of his body. From Rit's point of view, it moved to her right. By adopting such a position, Al used his opponent's raised right arm against her, as Rit's own limb now obscured her line of sight.

Whether he'd sensed an opening or perhaps had simply gotten too anxious, Al leaped forward with a slash at Rit's right hand.

Before his shotel could reach anything, however, Rit's own weapon came to rest just above the boy's shoulder, as though drawn toward the target by some unseen force.

"?!"

From the moment Al had started his attack, Rit's right hand had lanced forward. She'd stopped the sword just before it made contact, but she could have very easily smashed the poor boy's shoulder if

she'd wanted to.

"One more time, please!" Al shouted.

Rit smiled and nodded in reply.

I watched the two of them cross blades while I planted seeds and saplings that would eventually become new medicinal herbs in the garden.

Given how reserved Al had become recently, it'd come as quite the surprise when he'd asked Rit to teach him swordsmanship.

At first, Rit had turned him down, insisting that her skill wasn't so great as to teach it to others. However, after seeing the disappointed look on Al's face, she relented a bit, agreeing to teach him the basics. The weapon Al had chosen to master was the shotel, the same sort of bladed weapon Rit used. It was a single-handed, double-edged sword with a unique outward curve to it.

It was capable of utilizing that curve to reach around and cut past an opponent's defenses, but it could also be flipped and wielded more like a standard sort of curved blade. At heart, it was an armament best suited for facing off against another person who was also wielding a weapon.

The unusual shape made handling shotels somewhat tricky. Admittedly, I don't think I would've been able to wield one particularly well. Apparently, shotels were popular among those who had a background in arena fighting, like Rit.

A weapon master could become proficient with any weapon they chose, so in that sense, a shotel was probably a better choice than something relatively easy to handle like a spear or staff.

The wounds in Al's heart were still raw, but while he was swinging his sword, he would occasionally break into a smile. Maybe that was because of his Weapon Master blessing.

"The scars might never fully heal, but it might not be too long before he resembles his old self," I muttered.

In the end, Al didn't ever land a blow on Rit, but no matter how often she parried him, he never once dropped his shotel.

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After Al had gone to sleep, Rit and I stayed up drinking some coffee with a little bit of brandy mixed in.

"Thanks, Rit. He looks to be feeling a lot better because of you."

"It's probably more accurate to say it was thanks to the strength of his blessing. He seemed to really enjoy the feeling of moving his weapon around."

Rit didn't have that same level of emotional attachment to her own shotels. She certainly felt some connection to them—they'd been

with her through a lot, after all. It wasn't enough of a bond for Rit to break into a smile at the sight of them, however.

"At least his blessing is pushing him in a better direction. Al's still emotionally unstable, though; he's going to need a lot of attention," Rit noted.

"Yeah, I'll be sure to keep an eye on him, too," I replied.

"*Sigh.* Still, I've never tried to teach anyone before... Hopefully he doesn't pick up any bad habits from me," Rit said.

"I think you're doing just fine. Besides, in the end, it will come down to skills."

"Yeaah, but my teacher always said it wasn't enough only to know how to swing a blade. 'There's a philosophy to the sword, and no blessing will teach you that.' I never once beat him, you know."

Rit's master, Gaius, was the commander of the Loggervian royal guard. He had fallen to the Asura demon Shisandan. By the time the Hero's party was finally granted admittance into the Loggervian palace, Shisandan had already transformed into Gaius and assumed his place. For someone like Rit, who did as she pleased, Gaius was the only person she'd respected back in those days.

"I wonder if I'll be able to properly convey what he taught me to Al," Rit wondered, unease in her voice.

Placing a hand on her cheek, I said, "I'm sure you can."

"Really?"

"Yeah. That's the kind of person you are."

"What's that mean?"

Rit giggled at my baseless encouragement, but I meant what I said. I knew Rit well enough to understand that she carried Gaius's teachings with her both in matters of the sword and in her words. That's why I was certain that she'd be able to pass her master's teachings on to Al in all the right ways.

"Thank you," Rit responded as she closed her eyes and rested her hand on top of mine.

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Morning came.

As I was preparing to open the store for the day, the door suddenly burst open.

"R-Red!"

"Red!"

Gonz the carpenter and Tanta's mother, Nao, barreled inside. The two half-elves were trembling and looked deathly pale.

"Gonz and Nao? What is it? Did something happen?" I asked.

"T-Tanta! The guards took Tanta away!" Nao exclaimed.

“What?” I was dumbfounded. *They took Tanta?!*

“What should we do? Mido went to the station, but they wouldn’t let him see Tanta.”

Nao was usually the epitome of toughness, but even she looked shaken after having her son stolen from her.

“First, just take a deep breath and calm down a little. What reason did they give for taking Tanta?” I inquired.

After listening to what Gonz and Nao had to say, it seemed that they hadn’t actually seen Tanta get arrested. The boy had supposedly been helping to weed the garden at Granny Alma’s place early in the morning. At around seven, some guardsmen barged into her house. Alma was taken aback, but the intruders just pushed her aside, grabbed Tanta from the backyard, and tied him up without any explanation. Once the boy was bound, they dragged him away. Alma had explained as much to Gonz, Nao, and Mido anyway.

“You’re sure none of the men said anything as to why they were doing it?” I pressed.

“That’s what Alma told us...,” Nao replied.

“...I think I should have a talk with her,” I decided.

“B-but if something happens to Tanta while we’re doing that...!” Nao protested.

There were rumors about the guards using terrifying tools to interrogate captives, but such practices were standard in most corners of the world. The staff of reform, a kind of lightning elemental rod created by lightning dragons, the guardians of the law, was one of the more famous ones.

“But it’s not like you can bust your way into the station to help him, either. Even if that did work, you’d just end up becoming a criminal in the process. We have to figure out why Tanta was taken away first, and then we can work out how we should respond. It’s the best way to help,” I explained.

“But...” Nao was too flustered.

“Besides, Zoltan guards aren’t so passionate about their jobs that they’d jump straight into beating up a child.”

“That’s true. They’re always slacking off on their night patrols,” Gonz noted.

The authorities would only resort to torture if they wanted to force a confession. It was hard to believe that Tanta had anything like that to hide, so there shouldn’t have been any reason for the guardsmen to resort to such behavior.

Can’t afford to wait around and give them a chance, though, I thought.

Suddenly, I heard a pair of footsteps approaching behind me.

“What happened to Tanta?” a young boy asked.

“...Al.”

While his tone was calm, the juvenile half-elf's gaze was unwavering. At his waist hung a sheath holding the dull training shotel.

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After closing the shop, Rit, Al, and I made our way down the street. Rumors had already begun to fly. People exchanged worried whispers about the fate of poor Tanta.

Granny Alma was a half-dwarf, a rare sight for Zoltan. Dwarves were a race that had originated on the dark continent, but many had migrated to Avalon's northern mountain range and had built up a country for themselves there. Alma was the descendant of dwarves who'd drifted down from that region.

“Oh, Red! What do we do?!” the old woman cried.

“Try to stay calm. I'm going to go talk to the guards. Would you tell me what happened?” I entreated.

Granny Alma's small body was trembling, and her round, black eyes were filled with tears.

“They just hauled Tanta away! He's such a good boy... I should have protected him! I let him down!” Utterly distraught, Granny Alma clung to me as she recounted what had happened.

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“We've come to see Tanta,” I said to the guard standing at the entrance to the station.

“What's with all of you? Tanta? That elf brat? He's being interrogated right now, so come back tomorrow. And take that guy over there with you.”

The gruff guard pointed a gloved finger over toward Tanta's father, Mido. He was sitting on the ground with an indignant look on his face.

I pulled a document out of my pocket.

“This an official quest from the Adventurers Guild. It's a job to investigate the assault that occurred in Southmarsh. I heard from Alma that Tanta was taken into custody in connection with that event. We have a right to be present during any investigation into the matter conducted by the Zoltan guards. I'd appreciate it if you let us through so that we can resolve this incident together,” I stated.

“Say what?” The guard eyed me suspiciously as he took the document and reviewed it up and down. At first, he looked almost

amused, but that delight quickly vanished. As his eyes fell to the signatures on the paper, the man paled.

“The party members are Rit... Wait, *Rit the hero*?! And the one who filed the quest was Galatine?! The one from the Adventurers Guild?!”

Galatine was one of the bigwigs with the guild who’d gotten into it with Rit out in front of my shop a while back. Despite being a well-known public figure, he’d actually grown up in the poor part of Zoltan and knew Granny Alma.

Even if Galatine lived on Council Street now, he hadn’t forgotten his roots. Zoltanis were hopelessly lazy and irresponsible most of the time, but they would drop everything to help when their friends were in danger. When Galatine heard what’d happened from Alma and Rit, he immediately got the documents ready and gave us the authority to take part in the investigation.

Truthfully, the man may have had another reason for being so generous with his assistance. Most likely, he wanted Rit involved with resolving the major unrest gripping the town. Still, when he’d said that he wanted to spare Granny Alma any undue guilt, I trusted that he meant the words.

Glancing up from the document, the guard forced a polite smile, but none of us returned the gesture.

“I’ll go get the captain, so please just wait here a moment!” the man said, and he hurried inside.

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“Tanta!”

“Dad!”

“Are you all right?! They didn’t do anything to you, did they?!”

“I’m fine!”

Mido rushed to his son’s side, wrapping him in a hug before checking to make sure that the boy was unharmed. As I’d suspected, Tanta hadn’t suffered anything more than a slight rope burn on his wrists from when he’d been bound and brought for questioning. I applied a bit of the ointment I’d brought with me to the raw areas.

“I was surprised, but they didn’t hurt me or anything. Ademi’s dad even apologized and said he didn’t mean for this to happen,” Tanta said.

The half-elf boy had been locked in one of the rooms of the station. While possessing only a single window that was so small that not even a little kid could’ve fit through it, the room was fairly innocuous. A chair and table sat to one side. Atop the table rested a pitcher filled with water.

“Ademi’s old man just asked me if I had any idea where he might be was all. He was just worried about his son.”

That meant that the rumor about the guards hiding Ademi wasn’t true. We were going to have to talk to the missing child’s father to find out what was going on.

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“I’m truly sorry.”

Moen, Ademi’s father and captain of the guard, began by apologizing to Mido.

“I was the one who told my subordinates to bring Tanta here so that I could talk to him, but I never imagined they’d arrest him. Not one of them told me his father was here to see him, either.”

Mido was still very clearly infuriated over having seen the raw skin on his son’s arms, but while his indignant expression didn’t soften when Moen lowered his head and apologized, he also didn’t curse the other man out, either. Tanta himself was in a pleasant mood, likely because Moen had given him some sweet bread in apology.

“My subordinates suspect that someone in Southmarsh might’ve killed Ademi,” Moen explained.

“They’ve got the victims and perpetrators flipped there,” I shot back.

“Up until recently, Ademi would come by the station fairly often. The guards were friendly with him. After his disappearance, there are some here who feel like we’re the victims in all of this,” Moen disclosed, apologizing yet again.

It certainly explained why the men who’d come for Tanta had been so rough with him. Tanta was seen as being on Al’s side of the issue.

“But Ademi is the one who attacked my mother and father,” Al insisted, speaking up for the first time during the conversation. His voice was quiet but no less firm.

A pained expression took hold of Moen’s face when he heard the boy speak. “That’s right...but the only witnesses are you and your parents.”

“What do you mean by that?” I asked.

“There are some guards who doubt whether the person that you saw was really Ademi.”

“Oy!” I couldn’t keep myself from shouting at that.

Al’s cheeks were flushed red in anger.

“Please calm down. I’m not trying to say that you’re lying. I just want to be clear that such a line of thought is also possible. There are just too many things about this incident that don’t make any sense.”

That was certainly true, at least.

First of all, despite the fact that the victims were attacked with an ax, they only suffered blunt force trauma. They'd been hit dozens of times with the back of the weapon, resulting in several bones broken along with a few other injuries, but none of them had been critical, life-threatening wounds. While they had bled quite a bit, that was more because they had been pummeled on the forehead and nose—places that bled easily.

On top of that, despite the fact that Ademi would've had ample opportunity to finish them off, he left. One of the biggest mysteries was why Ademi attacked Al's home in the first place.

It was true that Ademi hated half-elves like Tanta and Al, but even so, would he really go out of his way to leave the council neighborhood, go south to Southmarsh, attack Al's parents, and then just disappear? And on the day of the storm, no less.

The boy's strange disappearance hardly helped the situation. Even though he'd made contact with his blessing at a young age, Ademi was still a child. He hadn't even reached the age of fifteen yet. No matter how naturally lazy the Zoltan guards might've been, they weren't so useless that they couldn't have caught a single child.

It was possible that Ademi ran off during the night, but that could be ruled out because the very next day was when the full force of the storm hit. He couldn't have been camping outside in conditions like that.

Finally, where did Ademi get the ax? Why use one at all? According to the testimony from Al's family, the weapon Ademi had used in the attack was a standard one-sided battle-ax. Ademi had a shortsword and short spear of his own, however, and he had already leveled up his blessing. That meant he'd used those weapons to hunt nearby monsters. Why wouldn't he have used the gear he was more familiar with instead of some foreign ax?

The simplest way to resolve the contradictions was to say that Al's family was lying. The idea that Ademi had left his room for some other reason and then Al's family had falsified their official statement was not a totally incoherent one.

In that version of the story, the attacker would have to have been someone in Southmarsh, not Ademi. It would certainly explain why Al's parents' wounds weren't fatal. They would've only been hit to maintain the illusion of an attack without actually endangering their lives.

"That's bullshit!" Al shouted.

When Moen put forth a similar idea to what I'd considered, Al unsurprisingly rejected the interpretation.

"It's only a hypothesis. I'm just saying that there are some guards

who're thinking that. That is why they've been treating the victims in this incident almost as if they were the perpetrators. I'm sure that is at the heart of how this unprofessional and aggressive arrest ended up the way that it did."

The guards' stance toward the victims in this incident had been incredibly problematic. Lawmen in Zoltan had always held disdain for those in Southmarsh because it was, to be frank, a slum.

The assailants from the attack that Rit stopped only stoked the flames; Campbell and his two friends had all been born in Southmarsh. That a guardsman had been killed in the attack hardly helped things, either.

"I'm sure it was Ademi; I saw! He was holding an ax, and he kept hitting my mother and my father! Over and over and over again! Ademi started getting really violent ever since he made contact with his blessing! I know just how savage he can be!" Al shouted, as if finally venting everything that had been stored up in his heart. Neither Rit nor I could find anything to say in the face of his anger.

"Y'know, I can't really believe Ademi would do something like that, either..."

"Tanta?!" Al turned to his friend.

"Ah, um, s-sorry! I-I'm not trying to say you're lying! ...It's just... about a week before Ademi went missing, he called out to me. I thought I was going to get beaten up again, but he apologized to me. He said sorry for beating me up." In a panic, Tanta desperately tried to explain himself.

"Ademi was worried about the fact that he would suddenly get so violent because of his blessing, too. You know he dreamed of becoming a guard, right? He said it himself before; guards aren't supposed to be violent. They're supposed to clamp down on the violence in the town."

"That's..."

"When he apologized, he said, 'It's okay now; I'm not going to hit people for no reason anymore.' He didn't look like he was lying. It was like the old Ademi was back. That's why I was surprised when I heard he attacked your parents..." Finishing what he had to say, Tanta fled behind me to escape Al's eyes.

"... 'It's okay now.' What do you think he meant by that?"

"I don't know."

Rit and I both felt something off about what Ademi had said to Tanta. We both had to wonder if the boy had somehow become able to control the influence of his blessing.

"The truth is, that was why I wanted to talk to Tanta today," Moen cut in. "I wanted to ask him in a bit more detail about that day. It's true that before he disappeared, my son seemed to be calmer. Just

the other day, an adventurer from that part of town mentioned that he and Tanta had been playing together. I wanted to hear from Tanta what'd happened."

"Ademi was in a really good mood that day, so as an apology, he gave me one of his spare wyvern race pieces," Tanta explained.

"I see, wyvern race, huh? That brings back the memories. I played that a lot, too, back when I was a kid." Moen's expression softened just a tiny bit. Not surprisingly, he believed in his son. I'm sure the guards did too.

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"I had heard that you were practically retired from adventuring, Rit. Maybe you only took the quest in order to be able to help Al, but still, I think it's for the best to share what information we have with you. We can provide a reward on our side, too, if you'd be willing to help us out," Moen said.

Rit looked a bit troubled, but in the end, she agreed to accept any clues the guards could provide, saying, "I'll at least listen to what you have to say."

Rit and I stayed behind in Moen's office, while Al, Tanta, and Mido had gone back first.

I'd thought Al might complain, but he seemed put off by the fact that Moen had apologized directly to him. The boy had only nodded and gone back to my shop.

"This is a bit rude to ask, but if I may..."

"Red, right? Go ahead."

"Were there any signs that Ademi was using that drug that's been going around?"

Moen's face screwed up instantly. "I made myself quite clear to him that only scum would use garbage like that!"

"Surely you see the similarities, though? This incident seems really similar to the one with Campbell."

In both cases, axes were used, which none of the attackers should've been familiar with wielding. Neither incident seemed to have a motive, either. Campbell's group had all died, while Ademi had gone missing.

"Moen, could you please share whatever you know about that drug?" I asked.

The man looked troubled, but he finally acquiesced after a moment.

"We don't have any solid evidence yet, since there is no one in Zoltan with Appraisal. We recently reached out to Central about getting a sage or saint that could use Appraisal for us. They're likely

ignoring the request, though...”

“It has something to do with blessings, though, doesn’t it?” I surmised.

“Yes. We’ve been calling it ‘False Prophet.’ It has the ability to create another blessing.”

I see... The specifics were unclear, but such a substance definitely would’ve had an effect on a blessing’s impulses. It certainly provided an explanation for why Ademi had told Tanta he’d been freed from the urgings of his Bar Brawler blessing.

Suddenly, that sales pitch about “becoming a new you” and the reason why people kept using False Prophet, even though so many people were overdosing on it, made sense. People were flocking to this dangerous drug in order to escape the role that God had chosen for them.

Interlude

The Hero Acquires Wings

The Hero Ruti drew her sword.

Before her was a pack of eight monsters. Four were titan crabs, giant crustaceans the size of elephants. The others were hieracosphinxes, sphinxes with falcon heads.

“Why are the sphinxes guarding these ruins?” Ares asked. Something about how the creatures fought without regard for their own lives felt off. Unlike androsphinxes, which had humanlike intelligence, hieracosphinxes were more beast-like in demeanor. So why had they protected these ruins in the middle of nowhere for dozens or even hundreds of years?

“Who knows,” Ruti responded disinterestedly.

It was a question that had no bearing on her. There were enemies before her and a sword in her hand. That meant there was nothing to worry about. Ruti dashed toward the monsters with her arms still limply hanging at her waist.

I like fighting. It's the only time that what I want to do and what my blessing wants to do are in sync.

A titan crab swung a massive claw down at Ruti, but she leaped away to the side. The hieracosphinxes tried to overwhelm her while she was in the air, but Ruti cut down two of them with only a single slash each. The third hieracosphinx's leg went flying off its body after another cut from Ruti's sword. After landing, Ruti immediately thrust her blade upward to pierce the stomach of the titan crab that loomed overhead.

Meanwhile, Tisse took out one titan crab, and Theodora took out another.

“Chain Lightning!” Ares launched a magic attack that should have picked off any remaining monsters.

“Not strong enough,” Ruti said expressionlessly. Despite her armor, the girl easily leaped on top of the head of the last titan crab that was still clinging to life and thrust her sword deep into it.

The ground trembled as the final enemy collapsed. Sand that had seeped into the crevices of the ruins was sent up into the air, forming

a cloud.

"Eh?" Ares squeaked in surprise as a shadow appeared inside the gathered particles. The last hieracosphinx's beak lanced out from inside the dusty puff.

"Uwah?!" Though Ares tried desperately to get away, his Sage blessing afforded him poor physical abilities, and he was too slow. The hieracosphinx's beak was closing in, threatening to tear his head off. The fearsome maw stopped just short of the man, however.

"R-Ruti!"

Ruti had casually caught the hieracosphinx by the back of the head with her left hand. The monster had the body of a lion, and its blessing should have even further boosted its physical abilities, but it still could not break free from that slight girl's grip. Silently, Ruti focused her strength into her arm.

"Kiiiiiiirrr?!"

The hieracosphinx likely weighed a massive amount, but it was still lifted off the ground. Its body spun around in the air, and then there was a horrible squishing sound as its head was smashed. Ruti had slammed the monster's skull into the ground. Blood splattered, and the hieracosphinx's body twitched, as if resisting its own death to the very end.

"M-my thanks..." Ares offered.

"Drop the area-of-effect attacks, Ares. There are four of us now, so make sure you actually finish off the ones you are fighting," Ruti chided without even acknowledging what the man had said.

"Hn? Ah..."

"Also, your positioning is off. Big Brother would always cover for you there, but Theodora, Tisse, and I aren't going to do that for you. Take care of yourself."

"S-sorry..." Ares gritted his teeth, grinding them as the word escaped his clenched jaw.

What Ruti had said was entirely true. Gideon was lacking in offensive abilities, but he was skilled when it came to covering others. He'd also possessed a wealth of knowledge regarding formations, tactics, and how to organize a proper rear guard. Ares had been able to use his magic much more freely back when Gideon had been in the party.

No, this is because Danan and Yarandrala left! If they hadn't abandoned the party for no reason, everything would've been fine! Ares rationalized. Surely, he himself hadn't made a mistake; his pride wouldn't allow such a thing.

Why aren't things going my way? I'm a sage, a wise man. I'm the one who carried this party on the journey. I handled all the mental labor. Why won't anyone give me the respect I deserve? Why do they always praise

Gideon, that deadweight who was holding us back? Name one thing he ever did!

“Enough talking for now. Let’s keep moving.”

Just as Ares was about to let slip a resentful comment, Ruti casually ended the conversation, walking away as if she had no interest in Ares at all.

Ruti wasn’t even looking at Ares anymore.





The party made their way down a passage, surrounded by giant stone walls with glyphs and pictures engraved upon them.

“There’s no mistaking it. These ruins are from the time of the previous demon lord,” Ares said as he examined writings inscribed in the language of the dark continent.

“Mr. Ares, that’s rather obvious at this point. We should maybe be considering what to do in the current situation in which we find ourselves,” Tisse remarked.

Magma slimes, minions of Dreadonna of the Flame, one of the four heavenly kings, were drawing near. The viscous creatures were the pride of Dreadonna’s forces, excavating and melting through ruins in order to gather ancient weapons spread across the lands. They were powerful and had a dangerous counter skill that caused them to spurt lava when they were attacked.

“Many of the slimes have Fire Mage and Savage Fighter blessings. Things could get bad if they attack us all at once,” Theodora observed.

If the party was going to retreat, it was better to do so quickly. The farther they allowed the enemy to advance, the more disadvantageous the situation would get.

“If they get the previous demon lord’s weapon, then us coming here was pointless,” Ruti pointed out.

Ares nodded in agreement. “Please calm yourself, Theodora. At worst, we can break through with my ice. Magma slimes are weak to ice magic.”

Theodora looked like she wanted to say something. Judging the effort to be worthless, however, she merely shook her head slightly.

Magma slimes can hide in walls and are capable of melting new openings that allow them to attack whenever and wherever they like. They might be slimes, but their intelligence is on par with that of humans. What’s more, we don’t even know how many of them we are facing. If they just hide in the walls and attack lava bursts, they’ll wear us down. We’ll run out of magic power long before they do, Theodora thought. She knew, however, that even if she or Ares died, the Hero would surely survive. Ruti’s strength grew with each passing day. She was already so powerful that Theodora, master of spears and the cleric arts though she was, couldn’t comprehend the depths of Ruti’s might anymore.

So long as the Hero is still alive, us dying might be for the best. Theodora, usually a stoic figure, flashed a little wry smile at that thought.

“Maybe I should have gone looking for Sir Gideon as well,”

Theodora muttered to herself.

I'm sure he would be able to figure out how to contribute in the best way he was able. He was a man with a broad field of view. I'm useless outside of fighting.

While it was too late now, Theodora regretted not having asked Gideon for advice on what to do when she'd started to wonder whether she was holding the party back.

It had been a long while now since Theodora had seen Gideon, but when she envisioned his face, she felt somewhat nostalgic.

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A gargantuan demon, a monster that stood over nine meters tall, was guarding the deepest layer of the ruins. It looked like a goat's skeleton with a thin layer of skin stretched over its frame. The massive creature wielded an enormous sword and let out a deep roar as acid dripped from its mouth.

"We have to fight a gargantuan demon?!" Ares exclaimed.

Such beings were considered the pinnacle of giant demons. They were particularly skilled at close-quarters combat. Much like Ares, Theodora and Tisse appeared quite unnerved at the idea of having to face such a mighty opponent. Ruti, however, was thinking about something else entirely.

"A gargantuan demon makes sense, but why were all those magma slimes here?" Ruti asked, expressing a similar sort of question to when Ares had wondered about the hieracosphinxes. The Hero hadn't shown much interest in the presence of the hawk-headed monsters, but something about the gargantuan demons' presence had piqued her interest in the unusual situation.

The demon lord's army was supposed to be composed only of demons. Throughout all of recorded history, this constant had remained unfaltering.

"Did the previous demon lord and Taraxon have conflicting ideas or something? All the books say that demons only consort with their own kind," Ruti stated.

Excepting Asura demons, all of demonkind had blessings. Unlike other creatures, however, every demon of the same classification shared an identical blessing. For example, every gargantuan demon possessed the Gargantuan Demon blessing. There were no confirmed instances of demons with blessings like Warrior or Mage. The general consensus was that any species with only a single blessing among its ranks was considered a demon.

"Big Brother theorized that maybe the reason they're all the same is because God expected them to fulfill the role of evil in the world."

Instead of a response, the gargantuan demon's roar thundered through the ruins. It was a call for the party to advance, if they so dared.

"Interesting." Ruti's lips curled into a twisted smile.

The young woman had often debated the nature of the demon lord's army with her brother during her sleepless nights. Demons working with regular monsters forced Ruti to wonder what exactly they were trying to defeat. Ruti pondered what her brother might've said at the revelation had he been there. The imagined scene brought a small amount of comfort to the girl's heart.

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"I told you so!" Theodora shouted.

The magical wall she'd conjured was holding off the advance of a new group of magma slimes, but it was only a matter of time until they found their way past.

Immediately after the party had defeated the gargantuan demon, a squad of magma slimes had ambushed them as if it'd been a plan. The semisolid creatures came bursting out of the walls one after another as the barrier the gargantuan demon had erected disappeared. The whole thing simply seemed too coordinated.

Fleeing through the door that the demon had been guarding, Ruti and the others had barricaded themselves inside. Excluding the Hero, the party had exhausted nearly everything they'd had in the battle with the gargantuan demon. Ares was only capable of a few more spells. Theodora wasn't in much better shape, having exhausted most of her own magic power; her breathing was labored.

"I'm back." The party's assassin had returned after having scouted the path ahead.

"Tisse! How was it?! Any sign of a weapon we could use against the slimes?!" Ares shouted desperately.

If there was any hope of escape, it rested with whatever mighty weapon was supposedly entombed within the ruins.

"There was a ship," Tisse replied.

"A...a ship?" Ares's voice wavered.

"I've cleared the traps in the passage ahead, so please follow me." Tisse turned and headed back down the hall she'd investigated only moments earlier. Left with little other choice, the rest of the party followed after her.

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The dune split, and a giant shadow leaped up into the air. It looked like a large boat with several spinning propellers in place of sails. Their rotating was lifting the massive vessel into the air. Great piles of sand that had accumulated on the vehicle over its many years of slumber were tossed aside in an instant. The little particles glimmered in the air as they scattered back toward the ground.

“Wh-what the heck is this?!” Ares asked, incredulous.

“It’s an airship,” Tisse answered flatly as she gripped the yoke controlling the flying vessel. Faced with a mass of instruments she had never seen before, Tisse’s hands were trembling despite her confident answer.

There weren’t many of them, but a platoon of the demon lord’s flame drakes was following them. At a glance, the airship’s fuselage was composed of a large number of wooden parts. Tisse suspected that it would go up in smoke if hit directly with a fire attack.

We need to get away quickly! thought the assassin.

“Tisse, you focus on the controls. Even if the drakes catch up, I’ll take care of them somehow,” Ruti instructed.

“Understood.”

Ruti headed toward the deck. Looking down, she saw the Desert of Bloody Sands racing by below. The party had great trouble traversing the dunes, but the airship coursed above it all so easily that the party was already approaching the desert dweller village.

“It’s quite fast, isn’t it?” Theodora approached from behind, expressing her astonishment.

“It is,” Ruti replied.

“And this isn’t even its full speed. The previous demon lord’s weapons sure are something. With this, we could go anywhere in the world... Is there anywhere you would like to go?”

“No. Not so long as I’m the Hero anyway,” Ruti responded as she looked up at the spinning propellers. “These are greater wings than befit me.”

An airship—wings with which to freely fly around the world. Ruti scoffed self-deprecatingly to herself while everyone else was enthralled by the party’s new acquisition.

Chapter 3

The Half-Elf Weapon Master Boy

“I’m sure it’s been rough, but keep your chin up.”

“Thank you, sir.”

Al lowered his head as the customer left. The boy was sitting at the counter, watching Red’s shop. This past week, both Rit and Red had been out of the store a lot.

Normally, they would make a point of juggling schedules so at least one of them was always around, but neither was present today, leaving Al to watch the shop.

He didn’t know very much about medicines, so Rit and Red had arranged a setup where if he got questions about what drug would be best, he would just note down the symptoms the customer was having, and then Red would deliver the substance in question at a later time. While not exactly an endless stream of customers, far more people stopped by than Al had expected, and he struggled a bit with finding the medicines they all wanted.

“One vial of white berry paste, please.”

“R-right away!”

There were some customers who would just point to a curative on the display and say they wanted that, but there were also those who just casually asked for a medicine by name. The shelves were labeled of course, but Al still felt pressured for having the customer wait while he searched for the right name.

“Ummm, ah, here it is. One vial of white berry paste.”

With a little sigh of relief when he finally found it, Al passed the concoction to the customer with a smile.

“That will be two payril!” he said.

The man who looked like a mage placed eight quarter-payril coins on the counter. “The guards didn’t do anything to you, did they?” he asked in a low whisper.

“Eh?”

The man was short, and his clothes were stained. On his back was a long, thin cloth bag. He seemed familiar, and Al wondered if he’d seen him in Southmarsh before.

“The guards hate us folks from Southmarsh. They’ve got no intention of trying to catch the criminal or anything. I’m sure they’d rather just arrest you and try to sweep it all under the rug by calling you all liars.”

Al recalled the talk he’d had with the captain of the guard. Ademi’s father had apologized, but...

“If anything ever happens, you can always count on Mr. Bighawk. He’s merciless with his enemies, but he watches out for Southmarsh folks like us. Your parents are staying with him, you know.”

“...My father told me to stay here.”

“I can understand that. The guards are always itching for a chance to put good folks like you, me, and Mr. Bighawk in our place. I’m sure he thinks it would be safer for you to keep away.”

The patron leaned over the counter and grabbed Al’s shoulder. Instinctively, the boy tensed up.

“Your old man’s too naive, though, kid. The guards are after you. They’re even watching this shop.”

“There’s no way...”

“How can you be so sure of that? As far as those damn guards are concerned, the best way to clear this up is pinning everything on you.”

“...”

The man’s grip tightened, and a jolt of pain shot through Al’s shoulder.

“Oops, sorry, sorry. I wasn’t tryin’ to scare you. I’m just concerned about you is all.” With a chuckle, the gruff customer’s lips twisted a bit. He patted Al’s shoulder to reassure the boy and then stepped back.

“Anyway, Mr. Bighawk’s concerned about you, too. And if you ever feel worried for your safety, or if you’re tired of letting them do whatever they want, feel free to come to his mansion. You know the place, right?”

“I do live in Southmarsh, too, you know,” Al shot back.

Bighawk’s high-class estate amid all the dilapidated shacks in Southmarsh stuck out like a sore thumb. There was no one living in Southmarsh who didn’t know who Bighawk was. He was the number two man of the Thieves Guild and boss of Southmarsh. Everyone who lived there gave up a small portion of their income to the man. In exchange, he policed the area, as the guards often avoided Southmarsh. That was the public reason for what Bighawk did anyway. In truth, there were many who were suspicious of him—Al included.

“Just tell the guys outside his place who you are. They’ll let you in and give you all the hot soup you want.”

There came the sudden chime of a bell as the door was opened. It was the nurse from Dr. Newman’s clinic. She’d likely come to pick up

some more medicine.

“Oops, can’t disrupt the business. Sorry for rambling on like that. We’ll be waiting... Oh, I almost forgot.” The shabby man placed the bag he was carrying on the counter. “You recently awakened to your blessing, right? I heard from your pops. Weapon Master, eh? You’re really going places with a blessing like that. For Southmarsh folks, the day you awaken to your blessing, however old you are when it happens, that’s your coming of age. It’s when you graduate from the free life of a child and are recognized as an adult who will go on to fulfill the role that God has chosen for you.”

“Coming of age?” Al asked.

“This is a little parting gift for you, the rising star us guys in Southmarsh can look up to. You’re one of us, so make sure you put your power to use helping your home. Do that, and maybe we can all manage to make it out of this terrible lot in life.”

Opening the bag, Al fished out its contents: a shotel. “Th-this is...?!” Al gasped as he saw the shine of the blade peeking from beneath the scabbard.

“It’s a proper crimson steel piece. Enhanced with magic, too. Bought from a traveling merchant from Igosu, the blade town,” explained the man.

“I—I couldn’t possibly accept such an expensive gift!”

Undoubtedly, the piece was valued somewhere above three thousand payril. It was the sort of weapon a C-rank adventurer would only be able to afford after a few serious challenges.

“It’s fine, it’s fine. Think of it as an offering of support for our new weapon master’s bright future. May God’s blessing be with you.”

With a grin, the man departed the shop before Al could push the weapon back into his hands. After he left, the nurse from Dr. Newman’s clinic approached the counter, looking somewhat worried.

“Are you okay? Was he an acquaintance?” she asked.

“We both live in the same part of town, apparently...,” Al explained.

Before too much longer, Red returned at last.

“Welcome back, Mr. Red,” Al said in greeting.

“Whew, thanks,” Red replied.

“What about Miss Rit?”

“She won’t make it back until a little later.”

Al looked disappointed when he heard that. Rit teaching him swordsmanship in the evenings was the highlight of his days now.

“Rit probably won’t be able to practice with you today, huh... All right then, I’ll fill in for her.”

“Spar with you?” Al was surprised at the offer.

“I don’t use a shotel, so I can’t teach you the intricacies of how to

actually use it as Rit can, but it'll be good for you to get some experience fighting opponents with different weapons."

"Y-yes please."

While he accepted the offer, Al had to wonder just how useful practicing with someone like Red was going to be. The boy's usual partner was Rit the hero. Al knew Red was likely a bit stronger than his D rank let on, but there was no way he was as good as Rit.

Besides, he doesn't even use a shotel.

Red still wore a bronze sword at his waist. It was a cheap weapon that no one who had any sort of standards about their equipment would've ever chosen to use. Such a blade couldn't have cost more than five payril. The thing didn't even hold a candle to the high-quality shotel Al had been given earlier. Such thoughts plagued Al's mind the entire time he and Red prepared to spar.

After the two moved to the back lawn, Red picked up a broom that had been left leaning against the wall of the shop.

"Okay, let's do this," Red said.

He was wielding a broom. Even a wooden sword would've been better.

"What is it?" Red asked after noticing Al's puzzled expression.

"Um, that is...um...weapon...?"

"You've got yours at your waist."

"Not mine! Yours!"

Red grinned. "A broom's more than enough for this."

All of a sudden, Al could feel his head getting hot. He didn't really understand why he was getting so angry, though he had a faint feeling that it was because of his blessing.

Al was a weapon master who wielded a shotel. He believed his armament to be the best around. An opponent who thought a broom was a proper challenge was insulting.

You think you're funny?! Looking down on shotels?! Al's blessing practically formed the notion for him. Without even waiting for the signal to start, Al dashed forward and drew forth his weapon. Blunted though the training shotel was, a hard enough swing from it still could've injured someone. Such a thought couldn't have been further from Al's mind, however. He was consumed with a desire to swing his blade with everything he could muster.

"Eh?"

Al had charged straight at Red, but by the time he realized what was happening, he was looking up at the crimson skies of dusk. At some point, the boy had fallen over. Al turned to Red, struggling to process what could've happened. The unexpected surprise silenced the blessing that had been needling at his mind.

"Weapon Master is a blessing that handles fear and confusion

well, but it is weak to anger. You need to learn to control yourself first,” Red explained.

“Eh? Huh?”

“All I did was trip you when you charged in headfirst without thinking.”

Al hadn’t seen anything like that happen. Even after Red described what’d happened, Al still had trouble grasping the situation.

“It’s true that a broom is no proper replacement for a weapon, but it has a longer reach than a shotel. If you charge in recklessly, it’s obvious the broom is going to reach you first.”

Al leaped back up.

“Ooooh,” Red said, smiling as though enjoying himself.

Whatever anger had gripped Al’s mind before was gone now. The feeling still smoldered in his heart, but the half-elf boy felt more collected now. His expression relaxed as he pointed his blade at Red.

“There you go. You’re a quick learner,” Red complimented.

This time, when Al carefully readied his weapon, Red also assumed a proper fighting stance with his broom.

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“Martial Art: Impact Blade!” Al shouted as he swung his sword. Energy welled up in the blade, hardening it.

“Oh, already took a Martial Art, did you?” Red casually waved the broom, easily deflecting Al’s attack.

“Whoops.”

Al had thought he’d kept enough distance between himself and his opponent, but Red used the opening created by deflecting Al’s Martial Art to close in on the boy. The tip of the broom’s handle was thrust right in front of Al’s face. The young half-elf had given up trying to count how many times that had happened already.

“I give,” Al conceded.

“You should hold off on taking any more Martial Arts for now. They’re flashy, but you should only be using them after you’ve got a handle on the fundamentals.”

“Yes, sir...”

Unable to break through Red’s guard no matter what he did, Al had ended up falling back on a special skill he’d taken, but even that hadn’t gotten him anywhere.

“Okay, that should be enough for today,” Red decided.

“Um...”

“Hmm? Got a question?”

“Why are you a D-rank adventurer if you’re this strong?”

Rit was an astounding master for sure, but Al was surprised to

learn just how powerful Red was, too. Al was still just a fledgling amateur at best, but having actually fought for a bit with both Red and Rit, he could tell that Red was an extraordinary fighter who might've even been a match for Rit.

"Ahhhh, that. I guess it's because I don't think there's any reason to make a name for myself just because I'm strong," Red answered casually.

"Huh?"

"I like the way things are right now. Running this shop with Rit, occasionally helping kids like you find their way, lending a helping hand to anyone around me who needs it... That sort of a life is enjoyable for me."

"B-but you could be respected by lots of people, fulfill your blessing, and become a great hero whose name is remembered for generations... Wouldn't that be a better life?!"

Red grinned as if there was something funny about what Al had just said.

"What happened to the kid who was so worried about his blessing? Didn't you tell me you wished you'd been born with a Warrior blessing? I guess you're adjusting well enough."

"Eh? Ah...I guess so." Al looked a bit shocked to realize just how much his thoughts had changed. Somewhere along the line he'd started to want to become a hero.

"It's fine. Being a hero is certainly one way to live. Earning fame by living and dying by the sword isn't a wrong way to be," Red stated, wistfulness plain in his tone.

"..."

"But it wasn't for me. That's all."

"The truth is, today, someone... I think it was someone connected to Bighawk... He gave me a sword," Al suddenly confessed.

"A sword?" Red raised an eyebrow.

"A really expensive, top-quality shotel. I started thinking that with a weapon like that, I could become a hero like Miss Rit... Now I'm not sure if that's what I really want or if it was just something that my blessing made me think. I can't tell the difference anymore..." Al admitted.

"I can't exactly read your mind, but you know... If you're worried about something, try asking your sword," suggested Red.

"Asking my sword?" Al repeated, confused.

"Do you want to cut through more and more enemies, or would you prefer only to fight in order to protect the people important to you? Ask your weapon what it wants. It's just an idea anyway. An old friend of mine who was good with a spear mentioned it to me once."

"...I see... Thank you very much!"

“Sure thing. Anyway, it’s about time for dinner.”

“Yes, sir!”

After nodding vigorously, Al cast his eyes down at the training shotel he’d been using.

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“A blade is a mirror that reflects its wielder’s soul. To use one is to converse with your true self.”

Back when she was still teaching the ways of spear-wielding, that was the lesson that Theodora the Crusader taught her temple knight pupils whenever they were troubled by the urgings of their blessings.

It was not uncommon for the ascetic lifestyle of the temple knights to conflict with the impulses of various blessings. Theodora was usually quite stoic, but she never failed to smile whenever she told the story of the trouble she’d had instructing a girl with a Feral Child blessing. Both Yarandrala and I had been surprised to see that side of the woman.

“She really put me through the wringer trying to teach her, but in the end, she became someone I was proud to call a comrade.”

I could still remember how happy Theodora had looked when she’d said that.

“A sword as a gift, huh...,” I muttered to myself.

Looking into that matter seemed like a good idea.

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I’d been passing the time by sipping some apple wine when Rit finally got home.

“I’m back,” she said, clearly weary.

“Welcome back. It must be rough working so late,” I said.

“Yeah, I’m beat.” Rit staggered toward the chair across from me at first but then lunged in my direction. She wrapped her arms around me as she sat on my lap.

“Whoa, be careful,” I said reflexively.

“Ahhh, that’s better,” Rit cooed.

“Don’t say it like you’re getting into the bath or something,” I chided.

“Oh, a bath would be nice, too. I forgot I said I was going to have one added,” Rit said, ignoring my comment.

“We should talk to Gonz about it after we’re done investigating this stuff,” I replied.

“I wonder how much it will cost.” Rit rested her chin on my

shoulder and went limp.

“Oh yeah, there was something I wanted you to look at,” I remarked, suddenly remembering an event from earlier.

“What?”

“Al got a shotel from someone connected to Bighawk. I looked into it a bit myself, but to be safe, I wanted to get you to check it out, too.”

“Okay, I’m pretty sure I still have enough energy to use Detect, at least.”

“Thanks. It’s in that bag under the table.”

Rit took one of her arms off my neck and reached down to grab the sack without getting up off my lap. Pulling the weapon out, she cast Detect to discern what manner of magic the sword had, if any.

“A small shotel. The blade is made of crimson steel. The hilt is ebony. The pommel is bigger than the guard. A swordsmith in the archipelago kingdom of Igosu crafted this. Not too shabby. Seems like an expensive piece a C-rank adventurer would go for,” Rit detailed.

“What about the magic?” I asked.

“Just a basic enhancement. The blade’s hardness and cutting edge have been boosted. You could save up some money to add a new magic effect or just enhance it further. Couldn’t get much better in regards to a C ranker’s first magic weapon. The problem is...” Rit trailed off as her eyes fell on the jewel embedded in the shotel’s hilt. “Yeah, no mistaking it. This sword has had Locate cast on it.”

Locate was a spell that indicated exactly where the ensorcelled thing was. While this informed the caster on the location of the target, you could also link it with a compass that pointed in the target’s direction. It was even possible to connect the Locate spell with a map that showed where the target was moving.

“Yeah, that’s what I thought, too.”

Rit and I had examined the shotel via different methods, but our conclusion was the same.

“Locate, huh. If you were being generous, you could interpret it as wanting to be able to come and help Al if anything happened to him,” I reasoned.

“Do you really believe that?” Rit asked.

“Nope. Bighawk isn’t that nice of a guy.”

Rumors abounded as to how Bighawk had attained his current standing within the Thieves Guild—and all of them involved conspicuous violence. The man certainly had no shortage of enemies, likely because of his methods. That was why he rarely ever left his territory in Southmarsh.

“I wonder why he would want to know where Al was...,” I muttered.

Whatever Bighawk was after, he wanted it so badly that he was willing to give up an expensive magic weapon for it.

"Oops, sorry to ramble about that when you came back tired. Did you eat something while you were out? I made a sandwich, but if you didn't eat, I could fix a proper dinner," I offered.

"Just the sandwich is fine," Rit answered.

"Really? ...I notice you didn't say you ate already."

"Yeah, but I'd rather stay like this for now."

Something was off about Rit. Compared to how she usually was, she seemed lonely.

"What is it? Did something happen?" I inquired.

"How long will we be able to stay together like this?" Rit responded with a question of her own.

"How long...?"

Did this mean something really had happened? There was an unease in Rit's expression unlike anything she'd ever displayed before.

"Forever as far as I'm concerned," I replied decisively.

"Really?"

"Really. Have I ever lied to you?"

"You have!"

"Huh?"

"You said to take the left path to get to the ruins! But they were on the right path!"

Rit was talking about the time we were searching some ruins back in Loggervia.

"O-oh, that... Wait, weren't we competing to see who found the elf treasure first? Who would ask their competition where to go?!"

"But you lied!"

Rit clung tightly to me as she repeated, "Liar, liar, pants on fire!"

With a bit of a wry smile, I hugged her back.

"Okay, okay, I admit it. I've fibbed when I had something to gain by doing it."

"I knew it!"

"But I wouldn't tell a lie if there wasn't anything in it for me."

"What do you mean?"

"I want to be together with you forever. So there's no reason for me to deceive you to try and get away. I wasn't lying about forever."

"...Aren't you embarrassed to say that out loud?"

"I mean, yeah... It's really embarrassing."

Having calmed down, Rit kissed my neck softly. With an almost disappointed look, she finally got up off my lap.

"If you don't mind, I think I would like to have some of your cooking," she said.

"No problem. I'll whip something up quick."

“...Thanks for everything. And, um, I want to be together with you forever, too.”

“That settles it then.”

Rit still seemed on edge as I headed into the kitchen.

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Two hours earlier, Rit was in Southmarsh during the evening.

“Owwwww, gimme a break here!” groaned an unsavory-looking man as Rit twisted his arm.

“You sure turned out to be a waste of time,” Rit remarked.

“Catching someone with a Roof Crawler blessing like me in the middle of a town—what kinda monster are you?!” the shady person spat.



“I’m the one asking questions here. Take out whatever you’re trying to hide from me,” Rit demanded.

“Dammit!” the man exclaimed as an audible crack came from his arm and a cold sweat formed on his brow. The limb was liable to break if Rit applied any more pressure.

“Just so we’re clear, I’m not going to break your arm—I’m going to tear it off. I don’t want you running off and healing the snapped bone.”

“Wh-what?!” The suspicious man could see that Rit was dead serious. There was no doubt her threat was genuine. If he wasn’t forthcoming with the item he’d concealed, Rit was likely to beat him to death and strip him bare in search of it. He’d lost this fight the moment he’d been caught.

“O-okay, already.”

Cautiously, the man turned over the bag of medicine he’d had concealed inside his cloak.

“You were way too cautious. I didn’t think this would take me so many days to investigate. You really wasted my time with this,” Rit said, annoyed.

“...”

“Oh? Cat got your tongue?”

The man did not respond and instead went slack-jawed and began to foam at the mouth.

“It can’t be!” Rit exclaimed. She never would’ve suspected someone in Zoltan of all places to have been implanted with a Sacrificial Bomb. Such items required Advanced Alchemy to make.

All at once, the man’s body exploded with a boom, damaging the surroundings and flinging a green liquid in every direction. Rit had tried to move to safety but hadn’t reacted in time. A bit of the goop had stuck to her arms and legs.

“An adhesive bomb!”

Such explosives made use of a sticky, birdlime-like substance. Creating adhesive bombs required a skill available to those with Alchemist blessings.

The sticky substance on Rit’s limbs would not be coming off easily. What’s worse, it was slowing her down.

I let my guard down!

Now sporting a large hole in his chest, the man collapsed.

Someone’s coming!

Rit could hear the sound of something cutting through the air as three people covering their faces with cloth appeared from the shadows. The bomb had also been intended to signal them to move in and eliminate anyone who’d caught the man who’d exploded.

Rit struggled to move her arms in a desperate bid to draw her shotels.

It got my scabbards!

Unfortunately, the strange, gluey stuff had also landed on her swords, firmly locking them in their sheaths. No matter how hard Rit pulled, the shotels would not come out.

“Shi—”

The three masked people leaped at Rit. Without the time needed to use her spirit magic, Rit dived to the side.

“Gaaaah?!”

As she dodged the assailants, Rit hooked one of her feet out and caught an attacker with a solid kick. He rolled across the ground and slammed into the wall of a plain-looking house.

“...A normal person would have died from one of my boots,” Rit observed as the one she’d sent flying shook his head lightly before standing back up.

“An Assassin blessing? ...No, that’s not it.”

Their movements were similar to an assassin’s, but there was something slightly off about them.

Did they gain new blessings from False Prophet? But they’re not using axes.

Rit looked down at a wound on her right arm. At the same time she’d kicked, one of her foes had scratched her with his weapon. While not a serious injury, it did mean that whoever these three were, they were good enough to actually land a hit on Rit.

I could get out of this pretty easily if I could only draw my swords...

If Rit found a moment to use her spirit magic, she knew she’d be able to clear herself of the adhesive. Her opponents were unlikely to grant her the time to do so, however.

If they were adventurers, they’d probably be on the lower side of B rank. Are they stronger than Albert?

Rit gritted her teeth, cursing herself for allowing her weapons to be neutralized so.

If they were using swords, I could take one of theirs, but...

The three assailants wielded claw gauntlets—three metal claws attached to a gauntlet worn over their hands. Stealing one away was difficult enough, but even if Rit did manage it, she was unfamiliar with that sort of equipment.

Hurriedly, Rit pulled a throwing knife from her cloak. It was intended to be used as a long-range weapon, but it was her only option at the moment. The masked men grinned, sensing that they had the upper hand.

Suddenly, a large shadow leaped above Rit’s attackers.

“Ugh?!”

A fist slammed down, shattering a skull. The recipient of the attack collapsed to the ground, dead from a single strike.

"I thought I saw a bunch of thugs ganging up on a single woman," said the newest addition to the battle. He was a large man who held out his blood-covered fist menacingly. Stunned, Rit had to blink a few times to make sure she wasn't seeing things.

That's not possible! Why is he here?! Rit screamed to herself.

"Danan!" she exclaimed aloud.

"Hey, Rit. Never would've guessed we'd meet again in a place like this. But let's save the catching up for once we're done with them."

The two remaining assaulters did not seem pleased to see that their quarry now had a powerful ally.

"...Who do you think you are?!" one of them shouted, indignant. Before the assailants could utter another word, however, they were promptly pummeled to death by Danan's fists. What remained of them was little more than lumps of flesh, blood, and bone.

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"O spirit of water, cleanse my body."

As Rit focused and performed the necessary signs, a water spirit in the form of a fish without scales appeared and washed away the adhesive clinging to her, the wound on her right arm, and the bloodstains. While Rit's body was now clean, her mind was still clouded.

"What are you doing here, Danan?" Rit asked.

"I could ask you the same question, but whatever. It's him. The Hero sent me to go looking for Gideon."

The words brought a twinge of pain to Rit's heart. It was by no means a physical wound, but Rit would've much preferred the cut from the claw weapon she'd suffered earlier.

"So you're going to take Gideon back?" Rit asked, hesitant.

"That was the plan, yeah, but..." Danan scratched his nape. "I've been here less than a week, but I think I've at least got a handle on the situation. Never would've guessed you two'd end up together." Danan grinned, but his expression quickly tensed up again. "I'm going to go back and say I couldn't find him."

"Eh?" Rit exclaimed, surprised.

"Gideon found a place to call home, right? That's for the best. I'm not gonna drag him away from that."

"Really?!"

A smile crossed Danan's stern face.

"Originally, I'd meant to leave town quick before you caught word of me being here, but... Well, it seems like you've got your share of

troubles out on the frontier, too, huh?" Danan peeled the mask off of one of the corpses.

"That's..." Rit was at a loss for words when she saw it. Horns were sprouting from the dead man's head. Up until a few moments ago, the attacker had looked human. Now the creature's scalp was bald, and a pair of curled spikes was poking from its skull.

"A stalker demon! What's a mid-tier assassin demon doing out in Zoltan?!" Rit asked, too stunned to think.

"No clue, but I doubt this is where the mystery ends," Danan replied.

"...!"

"I won't tell you to stay out of it because it's dangerous... Honestly, I'd be glad for the help. Working with you and Gideon again would be nice, but... It's probably better that Gideon doesn't know I'm here. His sense of responsibility can be a bit strong."

"Yeah..."

"If possible, I'd appreciate it if the two of us could share what we know. I'm staying at a place in Southmarsh called the Black Cat."

"Got it."

After that, the two of them shared what they knew about the strange goings-on in Zoltan. As expected, the Roof Crawler from before was a member of the Thieves Guild. He was part of Bighawk's crew.

"So, the Thieves Guild is behind it? That's a bit cliché," said Danan.

"That's just how these sorts of things go, isn't it?" Rit replied.

"Hmm." Danan stroked his chin, deep in thought. Rit watched him for a bit, but with no further leads to discuss, she decided to head home.

"Then, I'll be heading back now," she stated.

"Okay, don't get caught off guard like that again," Danan warned.

"I'll keep that in mind."

Silently, Rit made her departure. Once he'd sensed that she was gone, Danan let out an amused sort of sound.

"I knew Gideon was here, but I never thought I'd happen upon Rit, too. The world works in mysterious and amusing ways."

The thing in the shape of Danan began to saunter back to its lodgings.

"I only managed to eat an arm, so the memories are incomplete. Gideon knows Danan too well; he could blow my cover. I should stick to the shadows until someone puts a stop to what those other demons are up to."

The creature wore a smile of a different sort than Danan would have as it walked along the darkened road.

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At the same time, a man lay unconscious in a village on the coast.

“Oooh, he’s awake!”

Danan’s eyes shot open. He had drifted ashore and wound up in a village. A fierce hunger clawed at him from inside.

“F-food,” Danan weakly murmured.

“Just wait a moment. First drink some warm water.”

Someone passed a chipped cup filled with hot water to Danan, who downed it in a single gulp. A moment later, his stomach spasmed, and he was struck by a powerful urge to vomit.

“Amazing!”

“Wow, no one ever keeps the first mouthful down.”

Several villagers expressed their surprise at having watched Danan gulp down the contents of the cup.

“You’re quite something. And after not waking up for a whole week too.”

“I was out a week?!” Danan looked down at his right arm. The forearm had been severed at the elbow. The martial artist’s face turned a deep shade as he felt both rage and shame over the blunder.

“That bastard! I dunno how he survived, but if I ever see him again, I’m gonna murder him for sure!”

Danan had thought Shisandan to be dead. He’d seen Gideon cut the creature’s head clean off.

Shisandan was the general of the demon lord’s army that had transformed into Gaius, the head of the Loggervian royal guard. Using that disguise, the demon had been trying to destroy the country from within. Danan was certain that the one who’d attacked him had been the very same Asura demon.

“Perfect. If he keeps coming back to life, it gives me the chance to kill him ten more times and call things even!” With a thrust of his one remaining fist in the air, Danan announced his plans for revenge.

All around him, the local villagers exchanged confused glances. Each wondered who this crazy superhuman man was.

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“I’m going to get the hangover medicine from the storage room, Mr. Red.”

“All right, thanks.”

Recently, Al had really gotten the hang of working in the apothecary. It didn’t seem like he’d have any problem managing the store by himself now. A child’s ability to learn and adapt was truly

something to behold.

“Also, can you please stop flirting with him already, Miss Rit? He needs to prepare the gray starfish grass soon,” Al insisted.

“Come oooon, I’ve been so busy, I haven’t gotten to spend enough time around him lately,” Rit whined with her head on my not-all-that-comfortable lap. In the end, she acquiesced and got up.

Al had gotten into the habit of complaining if Rit wasn’t working when she needed to be. Conversely, Rit had begun clinging to me until Al finally said something about it.

Rit was the adult, and her behavior was a little questionable, I suppose. Admittedly, I could’ve told her to get to work, but I enjoyed it when she snuggled up to me, so I’d been staying quiet.

“Y’know, Al, since you’re helping out around the shop so much, I think I should start paying you a salary,” I said.

“You don’t have to do that. I already get to eat delicious meals every day. That’s enough,” the boy replied.

“Even so...,” I insisted.

“In that case,” Rit interjected. “Why don’t we go buy Al a shotel to use?”

“Eh? I—I couldn’t accept that. Wouldn’t that cost even more than whatever I’d earn working here? Besides, I’ve already got a shotel...” Flustered, Al did his best to refuse.

Shotels were an uncommon weapon, so buying one would’ve been a little on the expensive side. A steel longsword was just thirty payril, but a shotel made of the same material cost twice as much. Those were generous prices from a place that made weapons in bulk, too. One made by a famous bladesmith would cost even more, and getting one that was enchanted would run a couple thousand payril. Sword prices tended to run higher than most other weapons.

At a more fundamental level, forging the steel required one to possess at least Elementary Metalworking. For a sword where the entire blade needed to be developed, saving up all of your skill points from your first five levels and then pouring them into Forging was the fastest possible way to get the necessary skills. As such, the number of people capable of it was thus inherently fairly limited.

On that point, because no skills were necessary to be able to cast a bronze sword, it still sold for below ten payril even though the material itself was pricier than iron. Due to the substance’s nature, bronze wasn’t used to make two-handed swords or long polearm weapons, but a bronze sword was a freshly minted adventurer’s best friend.

One payril could cover the cost of living for a single day for the average person, so a sixty-payril shotel was enough to live off of for two months. Since Al lived in the slum area of Southmarsh, a shotel

was likely closer to what his family could live off of for four months. Al probably thought it was far too much for a couple weeks of part-time work.

“But the one you’ve got now doesn’t feel quite right, does it?” Rit said.

“Th-that’s...” Al stumbled on his words as he struggled to respond. Rit’s comment had been a bull’s-eye.

“That’s just how it goes. When you get more comfortable with everything, you can adapt yourself to the weapon at hand, but when you’re starting out, you should really use a weapon that fits your style and quirks,” I explained.

“When I was starting out, I had a sword made specifically for me, too,” Rit added, looking a bit nostalgic. Perhaps she remembered back to when she first started studying swordsmanship. Admittedly, I was doing the same. I could still remember clearly going back and forth with the old man at the village’s casting shop when I got my first bronze sword made.

We were going to get a proper steel shotel for Al, though. A weapon master would never accept a bronze shotel.

“It’s decided. Let’s go this afternoon,” I declared.

“Eh?! Today?!” Al asked, surprised.

“The blacksmith closes in the evening, after all.”

“B-but...”

“I’ll be tagging along, too. Or rather, Red will be tagging along with us, since I know more about shotels.”

“You too, Miss Rit?”

I moved next to Al and tousled his curly hair.

“Kids shouldn’t worry about being modest. At times like this, all you have to do is say a hearty ‘thank you.’”

“...Yes, sir. Thank you very much, Mr. Red, Miss Rit!” Dimples formed in Al’s cheeks as he flashed an innocent smile.

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Drake’s Armory sat on the outskirts of the working-class district. It was run by the self-proclaimed drake slayer, Mogrim, a dwarf.

“Welcome!”

Tending the counter was Mogrim’s wife, Mink, a human woman. In her late forties, she looked every part the friendly auntie. When she was lined up next to her shorter dwarf husband, they made a bit of an odd pair. No one could say they didn’t look right for each other, though.

In Zoltan, where there were so many demi-humans, a dwarf and human couple was a bit of an outlier.

“Oh, if it isn’t Red. Finally ready to graduate from your bronze sword?”

“Nah, I was actually thinking of giving Al here a sword.”

“His first?”

“Indeed, it is. I’d like to have a chat with Mogrim about it, if he’s got some time.”

“Well then, that’s something to get excited about! I’ll go call him, so stay put.”

Mink dashed over to the workshop next door, shouting, “Honey! Hey, honey!”

Al watched the woman go with a stunned sort of look.

“You hang out with Tanta quite a bit, but you haven’t really gone into many shops, have you?” I asked.

“No, sir,” Al replied.

“Most everyone around here’s like that. A bunch of oddballs, the whole lot,” I quipped.

“Who you callin’ an oddball?!” a husky voice called out. It belonged to a short man, even by dwarf standards. He was not any taller than Al, but his shoulders were broad, and he was barrel-chested. The bottom half of his face was covered in a quintessential voluminous dwarven beard.

“What, you didn’t realize that, Mr. Drake Slayer?” I teased.

“Oy! You sayin’ you still don’t believe me?! Then pull up a chair, sonny, and I’ll tell ya the story again! The tale of how I slew the master of Lake Enka, the emperor of the cursed mists, Fafnir, the mist drake!” Mogrim puffed out his chest.

“Save your breath. I’ve never heard of any mist drake called Fafnir to begin with. And you’re talking about Lake Enka as if it’s some lost region teeming with drakes, but it’s a pretty well-known place for fishing,” I shot back.

Mogrim’s story changed every time he told it. Supposedly, the general gist of him defeating some kind of monster at some lake or another was true enough. All the other stuff he’d added over the years was just a way to make things sound more impressive.

“Get on with it already!”

“Gah?! ”

As Mogrim tried to recount his adventure, Mink kicked him in the back of the head. With the difference in physiques, Mogrim fell flat on his face.

“Quit wastin’ the customer’s time with your silly stories! This boy here, Al, is here for his first sword! You better make him one that fits him just right!”

“Ugh, owwww. Sheesh, you didn’t hafta kick me.”

“Quit your whinin’ and get to work!”

Mogrim stood back up, brushing away the dust and dirt that had clung to his beard.

“So, sonny! A shotel, huh? That’s a tall order, but don’cha worry! I’ve got tons of weapons back in storage, so we can start with those to figure out what sorta balance works best for ya.”

“Y-yes, sir!” Al replied.

“All right, I’ll tag along then. I know a fair bit when it comes to shotels,” Rit said, causing Mogrim to do a double take.

“You’re one lucky kid to have Rit the hero of all people to give you advice when getting your sword made,” Mogrim observed.

“I couldn’t agree more!” Al answered, eager.

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While the three of them moved to the back, I idly browsed the storefront.

Mogrim had a top-tier craftsman blessing—Runesmith. It wouldn’t have been odd for him to have opened up a shop aimed at aristocrats or higher-rank adventurers, but apparently, his blessing was not a particularly great fit, so he struggled a little when it came to enchanting weapons and armor with magical effects. The man was unrivaled in matters of standard forging, however, and he was widely respected as the best blacksmith in this part of town. Hardly anyone believed his old stories, though.

A bell rang as the front door opened.

“That you, Red? What are you doing skipping work to hang out at a place like this?” asked a familiar voice.

“Hmm? Gonz, Storm, and Dr. Newman? You guys make for an odd trio.”

A group of people I knew quite well had entered the blacksmith shop. First was Gonz the half-elf carpenter, followed by Stormthunder the half-orc furniture craftsman, and finally Newman the human doctor.

“Dr. Newman and I were originally planning to come together. I had an order for carpentry tools, and the doctor was looking to get some surgical scalpels,” Gonz explained.

Dr. Newman nodded in agreement.

“I had left my knife and the plane I use to shave down furniture to get repaired. I was just going to pick those up when I ran into the two of them on the way over.”

Each of the three had his own distinct look: Gonz with his dashing face, Storm with his fearsome visage, and Dr. Newman with his balding head and gentle smile. After running into one another, they’d all had a few laughs and decided to stop by the blacksmith’s together.

“Oh yeah, Red, got any stories to tell about your girlfriend now that you’ve been living together awhile?” Storm asked.

“I’m curious, too. How about it, Red? How are things going with the two of you?” Dr. Newman chimed in as well.

The three of them smirked as they peered over at me.

“All right then, if you want to hear some stories, I can go however many rounds you want. But you’d better be careful. Once I start talking about Rit, I can keep going so long that the tools you spent all that effort to get repaired will have rusted over.”

The three men burst out laughing at that, and Storm slapped my back.

“Sheesh, looks like you’ve got yourself a happy thing going,” said Stormthunder.

“If only I could find the right person somewhere,” Dr. Newman bemoaned.

“What about the girl at your clinic?” Gonz asked.

“She’s got herself a boyfriend already. A C-rank adventurer no less,” Dr. Newman replied.

“Whoa, really? It’d be pretty hard for a doctor to compete against that,” I commented.

“Should you really be saying that, Mr. D-rank adventurer?” Stormthunder quipped.

“It’s fine; I’ve got Rit,” I fired back proudly.

The three of them glanced at one another after hearing my remark, and a split second later they all started mercilessly pummeling my head. I frantically beat a retreat to the counter where Mink was standing.

“What new foolishness is this?” Mink inquired.

She looked dumbfounded by our silliness, but it still brought a smile to her face.

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“Oh yeah, Red, about that single bed that Miss Rit bought...,” Stormthunder began.

After things had settled down, the four of us had started to talk shop for a while. Suddenly, there came an angry shout from outside.

“Someone picking a fight?” Gonz wondered aloud, ever curious.

“Let’s go take a look,” Storm answered.

The two promptly raced out of the shop. Dr. Newman and I glanced at each other, having been left behind.

“How about it, Red? I could do with a bit of extra money from some injured fools paying for medicine and healing fees, but what do you think?”

“Oh, that’s a good idea. Let’s go earn a little bit of walking-around money.”

Discussing what we would buy with the money we were going to earn, Dr. Newman and I headed outside. To our surprise, it wasn’t a fight that’d broken out. A woman with two small children at her side had gotten into a heated argument with a pair of men.

The mother lived nearby. I didn’t recognize the two men, but I had a feeling they were from Southmarsh. The children were scared and clinging to their parent, and she had extended her arms to cover them as she faced down the pair of menacing aggressors.

“That’s enough of ya! If ya wanna do it that bad, go do it yourself!” the woman demanded.

“You’re just as annoyed with those stuck-up prig guards and council jerks as we are, aren’t ya, lady? Southmarsh and here and the harbor, we’re all getting persecuted here, so we’ve gotta stick together to fight back! If we don’t, Zoltan’ll never change!” one of the men shouted back.

“Quit it already! You’re scaring the kids!” the mother insisted.

Despite the intensity from the two pushy men, the woman stood firm and was giving back in equal shares. That was a working-class lady for you.

“Hey, Gonz, Storm, what’s going on?” I asked.

“Not sure, but those Southmarsh guys are apparently trying to recruit people to protest at the guard post on Council Street,” Gonz explained.

“Oh yeah, I heard people have been gathering there the past few days,” I replied.

“They’ve been giving out food to people who participate, so they’ve gathered quite a few from the harbor and this part of town, too. No doubt a lot of folks from Southmarsh are joining in as well,” Gonz added.

I’d heard about the growing protests. It’d been keeping the guards so busy that they hadn’t been able to devote many people to the incident with Ademi or the drug investigations. Supposedly, they were trying to outsource those inquiries to adventurers. The trouble was, most adventurers had their hands full trying to finish the quests they’d put off during the summer.

At the moment, the only people still actually investigating were Rit and me.

“I’ve had enough!” Storm’s nostrils flared as he leaped out.

“Who asked you?!” one of the men shouted.

“And who even are you?!” said the other.

“Your mother never taught you to introduce yourself before askin’ other people their names?! I’m Stormthunder! I’m a furniture

craftsman in this part of town!”

“Storm!” the woman cried.

“Just move along, Maribelle. Worrying about fools like them is just a waste of time,” Storm said back at the woman.

She looked a bit uncertain, but she quickly nodded and started to leave.

“Oy, oy! Who d’ya think ya are comin’ out o’ nowhere like that?!”

Indignant, the two men approached Storm.

“And who d’ya think *you* are talkin’ like that?!” Storm made no effort to hide his own coarse side, stepping in and grabbing the Southmarsh man by the chest. The man snapped at that, cocking his right hand back to punch Storm.

“Whoa there,” I said as I grabbed the raised hand before it could barrel into Storm’s face.

“Th-the hell are you?!” the man spat at me.

“You should back off now. If you punch Storm, that’s not gonna be the end of it,” I said.

“Wh-what did you say?!”

“Take a look around you.”

“Huh...!”

Every nearby resident who’d heard the commotion had gathered.

“Ulp...”

They were all glaring at the two men from Southmarsh. Everyone in the neighborhood knew Stormthunder. They all had something from his shop. If someone was fool enough to pick a fight with their beloved local craftsman, they weren’t about to sit by and watch it happen.

“Ah, ugh... Damn fools, the lot of you! Don’t you forget, everyone who crosses Mr. Bighawk lives to regret it. There hasn’t been a single person who ever went against him that didn’t pay the price!”

A tremor of agitation spread through the crowd when one of the ruffians invoked Bighawk’s name. The number two of the Thieves Guild was feared even outside of Southmarsh.

At that, the two men regained a bit of their momentum. The man that Storm and I had between us violently pulled himself free from our grips and opened his arms wide as he shouted about Bighawk.

“We know all your faces, so don’t go thinking you’re safe. If Mr. Bighawk wanted to, he could crush your little neighborhood. You’d better work on your bootlicking skills while you still can!”

“Oh? That’s odd; I’ve crossed him once or twice, and I’m just fine.”

From the gathered crowd emerged a young woman who appeared unfazed by the ruffian’s threats.

“I’ve lost count of the number of times I’ve interfered with his

business, and I'm pretty sure he holds a grudge over it, too. In fact, back when I first came to Zoltan, I was attacked by a bunch of his henchmen while I was sleeping. I killed twenty of his underlings as payback for disturbing my sleep, and nothing's happened since. So I can't really say I've ever come to rue crossing Bighawk."

"R-Rit the hero?!" exclaimed one of the men.

With a smile, Rit rested a hand on the hilt of one of her shotels.

"Also, Stormy's store is a favorite of mine. I even got the bed where I lay my head every night from his place. If Stormy were to happen to get injured, I'd be rather put off."

"Eh, ah...ummm..." Immediately, the two hoodlums began to falter.

"Out of curiosity, is there much difference between twenty henchmen and twenty-two? It doesn't seem like there really would be to me, but what do you think?" Rit needled.

"“Please forgive us!!!”" The apology that came from the two men almost sounded like a cry of terror. Immediately, they turned tail and ran.

"That's Miss Rit for ya!"

"Thank you, thank you."

As cheers and praise erupted from every direction, Rit seemed almost a different person entirely. Looking relaxed and cheerful, she waved back to everyone.

Interlude

Restoring My Good Name

When I came to, I could feel myself lying down on a hard surface.

“You were totally out of it,” a voice informed me.

Opening my eyes, I saw a strong-willed pair of sky-blue eyes peering down at my face.

“Ngh... Morning already?”

It felt like there was a haze clouding my head. I wondered if perhaps I’d slept a bit too long.

Ummm, where is this? I wondered. *That’s right*, I recalled after a moment. Rit and I had defeated a scissorhands demon and set up camp on the way back to the capital of Loggervia.

“Sheesh, why’d I have to end up sleeping in the same tent as you?” Rit pouted.

“I mean it’s not like I intended for it to end up like this, but your party ran off, and the demon lord’s army is patrolling around these parts, so letting you go alone would be dangerous, you know?” I said.

Rit had temporarily formed a party with us, and we were traveling together. That didn’t mean that Rit was on our side, however, which was why Ares had been against her joining up. He was suspicious that she was planning to hinder us in some way.

After having it out with each other for a while, Ares finally gave in on the condition that I would stay close to Rit at all times and keep an eye out for anything untoward. When it became clear that meant that the two of us would be sharing a tent, Ruti was annoyed, and I got an earful from Rit about it, too. It was a never-ending stream of complaints from all sides.

I let out a long sigh.

Rit’s pouting face clouded over when she heard that.

“...What are you sighing about?” she asked.

“Ah, that... I’m just a bit worn out from the consecutive battles. Maybe I should see about renting a bath when we get to the capital, so I can take a night and just relax a bit.”

It was a lie. I was trying to bluff my way through the question. Rit didn’t seem to buy it as she continued to look at me with the same

murky expression.

“Also, um, I didn’t think Ares would be that stubborn about you joining. I suggested us moving together because it would’ve been dangerous for you to go on your own. We can make a stop at another town along the way if you want to split off. I’m sure there will be some adventurers or guards there who’d join up with you. A detour like that would take an extra night of camping, though. What would you prefer? I’m sure I could get Theodora to switch and take over for me. She’s more the standard stoic fighter than I am, so she won’t talk your ear off.”

“I never said I hated being with you,” Rit interjected, her cheeks looking a little red.

“Eh? Uh, I...”

I was at a loss for how to respond. I never would’ve expected that reaction from Rit.

“Your argument was perfectly reasonable. I’m an adventurer; I’m not going to whine about having to share a tent with someone.”

“I’m pretty sure you did complain about having to stay in the same tent as me...”

“That’s...um...” Rit turned away. I could hear a quiet stammering as if she was trying to figure out how best to respond.

“Anyway, I never said I hated being with you! ...So you don’t have to look like that.”

“Like what?”

“It’s not like I don’t understand that I’m causing you a lot of unnecessary effort and trouble, okay? I’m sorry.”

“D-don’t worry about it. Lately, Ares always has something to say about everything I do. I’m used to it by now.”

Rit’s attitude had shifted out of nowhere.

“Hey, is something wrong? Am I making a weird face?” I asked.

“...You looked heartbroken.”

“Ah. Well, it’s been nonstop fights for a while now. It just sort of gets to me from time to time. It’s not like it’s your fault,” I assured.

“...I-if you need someone to lend an ear so you can vent a bit, I can listen.” Rit’s voice sounded restless as she sat there still facing away from me. “It’s not like I’m really in your party; that makes me the perfect person to complain to. Plus, we’ve got some time until the rest of them wake up.”

The chirps of nocturnal insects could still be heard from beyond our tent. The morning was still a way off. I was a little unsure, but I thought I could sense a hint of concern for me in Rit’s words. It was true that I was a bit worried about being able to keep up in the coming fights, what with getting overtaken in terms of blessing level.

I’d stewed over the problem of my Guide blessing for a while now,

and the only natural conclusion seemed to be that my job was done. While I considered it often, I'd never once hit upon anything I could provide to overcome the limitations of my role.

Truthfully, I wasn't sure if something like that even existed, but I had to keep trying. If I didn't come up with something, I wouldn't be able to continue with Ruti on her journey.

"...Yeah, I guess so. If you don't mind just nodding along a bit while I talk...", I admitted.

"Sure."

I probably just wanted someone to lean on for a bit. Rit turned back to face me and quietly listened to what I had to say at first. As I kept going, however, she began taking my side. Rit got indignant and annoyed when I told her of Ares's various complaints. She even started to argue as though she were in my position.

"How do you put up with that?! Those things are all his fault!" Rit declared, as incensed as if she herself had been wronged. Seeing her like that, I smiled...and...

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That was where I woke up.

"A dream? That sure brings back memories."

It had been a memory of that night in the Loggervian forest.

"Rit was at my side back then, too," I whispered.

Our two beds had been pushed neatly together. Rit was sleeping close enough to me that if I reached out my hand, I could caress her cute cheek. I gently touched her hand that was sticking out of the light summer blanket.

"Red..."

When she called my name, I froze up. I was afraid I'd woken her, but she was still asleep, a look of bliss on her face.

Is she dreaming about me?

She showed up in my dream, and I showed up in hers. That alone wasn't really all that special, but my face started to heat up when I thought about it.

The reason I'd dreamed of Rit was likely because of what Storm had said earlier that day after that commotion with Bighawk's flunkies.

"A double bed, eh? Starting to regret getting a single? All I want is for Miss Rit to have the best bed possible. It hasn't been long, so if you want to switch for the double, I'll take a trade-in at full value, and you can just pay the price difference."

Rit and I had slept together in a tent so small our shoulders were touching on that Loggervian night. Now we were lying on two beds

pushed together. If I reached out, I could touch her, but we weren't close enough that we'd rub up unintentionally.

On top of that, Rit seemed to be a bit worried lately about our simple life together coming to an end.

"I guess we should go get a double bed," I muttered.

Getting closer to Rit had to become more of a priority. I didn't want her fretting about stuff like that anymore.

Taking care not to rouse her, I quietly made my plans for the day.

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Come morning, Rit and I went by Stormthunder's furniture store. As I'd decided last night, the plan was to purchase a double bed.

"What, here already?" Storm's gruff face broke into a grin tinged with exasperation. "I was sure you were only going to stop by once things settled down."

"It'd be a shame to get so absorbed in all the trouble that I forgot about my wonderful life with Rit here in Zoltan."

Us buying the double bed today was also meant to demonstrate my taking a more proactive position. It was still a bit embarrassing, though, since Storm was an acquaintance.

"Ooooooh, looks like things have been moving pretty fast since you first came in to get a bed. You should have just gotten the double bed to begin with, ya wuss," Storm prodded.

"I'm getting the double bed now, aren't I? Let me clear my good name here," I shot back.

"Hey, Red! Which one should we get? I want one that looks nice and solid!"

Paying no heed to the two of us, Rit had started comparing the beds lined up before her. She looked excited but also entirely serious about the task at hand.

"You've got quite the eye for quality, Miss Rit." Storm's gruff craftsman expression transformed in the blink of an eye to a sparkling salesman smile as he hurried over to Rit.

"That one was made using Whitehorse wood. It comes from a tree that's said to only grow in forests inhabited by unicorns! It has an elegant texture and just the faintest natural scent to it. It's both stout and flexible, just like a unicorn's horn. It's a truly exquisite material that even I rarely get a chance to work with."

Rit seemed to be enjoying herself as she listened to the sales pitch.

Wait, isn't that going to be super expensive?

"...Well, that's fine I guess," I muttered to myself.

Even if it was expensive, compared to what Rit had at her disposal, it was little more than pocket change. What's more, I felt bad

about the fact that my pride had kept Rit from getting the bed that she'd wanted before. Rather than compromising this time, I wanted her to pick her favorite. That way, there'd be no regrets.

"Come here, Red," Rit beckoned.

"Sure, just a second."

A grin spread across my face as I approached the new bed Rit stood beside. She wore an equally excited smile.

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After arranging for the delivery, we headed to the guard station on the north side of town.

"We're back, Al."

"Mr. Red!"

While Rit and I had been off picking out the new piece of furniture, we'd left Al with the guards, as it seemed unsafe to leave the boy to himself.

Actually, that wasn't the only reason.

"Sorry to keep you waiting. There weren't any issues, were there?" I asked.

"No. I was a little scared, but the two who looked after me were nice, so it was fine."

The two guards behind Al waved.

"They don't live in Southmarsh, but apparently, they just moved here a few years ago. That's why they don't hate Southmarsh as much as the other guards do," Al said with a smile.

I made a point of remembering the faces of the two men who had so kindly watched out for the half-elf boy. With a nod of thanks in their direction, Al and I left for home.

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That night, it was just the one double bed and the two of us. One and two. The math wouldn't work unless the two of us could fit in the one. We couldn't split the thing apart anymore. After getting caught in spiraling thoughts like that for a moment, I eventually decided to set them aside for the time being.

"Red," Rit called.

"U-uh, yeah?"

"Hurry up."

Rit was sitting quietly on the bed and gesturing for me to join her. She was wearing her soft pajamas. The bandanna she usually wore around her neck had already been removed. Her golden hair swayed

as she patted the spot next to her.

“Okay, okay,” I said.

Right, what’s the point of this if I’m going to revert to being a wuss now? I cleared my mind and joined Rit. The two of us sat there, not lying down, just looking at each other.

“Khhh!” Rit was the one who gave first. She was assertive but had a shy side to her. Her legs fidgeted as she turned bright red and grabbed her pillow to cover her face.

It just makes her look all the cuter! I thought.

“Should we go to sleep early?” Rit asked with a muffled voice.

“Yeah, I guess we should,” I replied.

I blew out the candlestick. Now the room was only lit by what little moonlight came through the window. Rit slowly removed the pillow covering her face. Her cheeks were red, and she was looking up at me ever so slightly. Beautiful sky-blue eyes watched me, trembling all the while.

“Look how red you are,” Rit said with a giggle, looking beet red herself.

I responded by lying down on the bed. “Come on,” I said, spreading my arms.

Rit’s eyes went wide, and she covered her mouth with both hands, trying to hide her joy.

“Y-yay!”

“Oof.”

Rit squeezed her eyes shut as she leaped into my arms. The two of us bounced a little on the mattress from the force of her dive.

“Someone’s heart is racing.” Rit was lying with her chest pressed tightly to mine as a grin spread across her face.

“My heart or yours?” I asked.

The answer was obvious—it was both of ours.

Rit rested her chin against my shoulder, and I slid my hands behind her back and gave a little squeeze. Our chests thundered in sync with each other.

The way Rit’s beautiful golden hair felt when I caressed it was amazing, almost like silk. Rit’s lips brushed against my neck. There was an endearing warmth that came from her body as we lay entangled.

Rit’s hands touching my back through my pajamas slid down to my waist and then back up beneath my clothes. Her fingers brushed directly against my skin, causing me to quiver raptly.

“Rit.”

After hearing me call her name, Rit looked up at me. A hesitant exhale slipped from between her lips.

“Red...I...”

I pressed my brow to hers as I reached for the buttons of her pajamas with both hands. One popped open, revealing a slender collarbone. As the next came undone, Rit's well-endowed and beautiful breasts came into view. There was a bead of sweat trickling perfectly down between them.

Rit removed my clothes as well, her fingers crawling across my chest as she undid the fastenings of my shirt. Her hand was hot and just a little bit sweaty.

"Sorry, my hands must be rough from all the calluses... It's because I've been training with swords ever since I was little..." Rit mumbled, looking down as though embarrassed.

I took Rit's right hand in my left and placed it on my cheek.

"I like your hands."

Rit looked up, her face flushed again. She caressed my cheek with her hand as her face drew near. Our lips gently met.

With my right hand, I undid another button on Rit's pajamas, and her breasts popped free with a slight bounce. Rit's body trembled with a start, her eyes narrowing rapturously even as we continued to kiss.

With one hand, I began to reach out toward Rit's chest.

"!"

Suddenly, I sensed movement outside the room. Rit and I broke our kiss and instinctively froze.

"I guess Al went to get some water to drink," I said with a hushed voice.

"Sounds like he's trying not to disturb us," Rit replied.

The two of us blushed and smiled as we continued staring into each other's eyes.

"Rit, maybe we shouldn't today..."

"Ugh, even though you're so cool, you're so hopeless," Rit said playfully.

She kissed me one more time, as if pecking at me. Wrapping my arms around her, I pulled Rit in close such that both of our bare chests were pressing against each other.

"Sorry, I only meant to flirt a little at first, but I got a bit carried away," Rit admitted.



“It was the same for me,” I said back.

“I see. Eh-heh-heh... Should we go to sleep then?”

“Yeah, I guess so. Tomorrow seems like it’s going to be pretty busy. Good night, Rit.”

After kissing Rit’s forehead, I reluctantly shifted away from her.

“Nfh... I’m going to burst from all of these feelings! Good night... I hope the trouble in town ends soon.” Rit smiled happily, took a deep breath, fixed her pajamas, and closed her eyes.

Chapter 4

Driven by a Mad Dream, Bighawk Addresses the Masses

After five days, it was finally time to pick up Al's new weapon.

"All right, be careful. Make sure you come straight back."

After receiving a warning from Rit, Al waved to her and headed off to pick up the sword he'd been anxiously waiting to finally have in his hands.

Al was wearing a full-body black cloak to hide his identity as a precautionary measure.

"I'll be back soon," Al called, though he looked nervous.

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It was raining that day. Summer had only just passed, but the cold precipitation felt like a prelude to an early winter. Beneath the cloak, a figure trembled slightly from the chill. With a hand on the hilt of a shotel, the hooded person continued onward. Mogrim's workshop was at the other end of an approaching alley.

"...!"

After rounding the corner, the cloaked figure was suddenly surrounded by a group of eight—four in front and four behind.

"Heh-heh-heh... Al, boy."

The men were grinning. Each carried an ax.

"Mr. Bighawk would like a word with you. Won't you come with us?"

Slowly, the men approached, brandishing their weapons suggestively.

"Scared? Cat got your tongue? Don't worry, you don't need to be scared. If you behave yourself, you won't get hurt."

A trembling issued from beneath the hood at the threat.

"Hah-hah-hah...", chuckled the concealed person.

"What is it, Al? Gone mad from fear?"

"Wait. That laugh... That didn't sound like a kid's voice..."

The Cloak of Disguise was cast into the air and landed on the ground with a gentle sound. The one who'd been wearing it was glad to be free of its illusory magic.

"Oh, did you mistake me for Al? Sorry to disappoint, but it's me!" Rit declared triumphantly. Al's magic shotel hung at her waist.

"Too bad Locate can't tell you who's holding the sword! Thanks for taking the bait!"

Two of the men immediately leaped at Rit from behind. Doubtless, they figured their only chance was to pounce before Rit had an opportunity to draw her weapon. By the time they reached her, however, she already had a shotel in both hands, and they fell to the ground amid a splatter of blood.

"Going from twenty to twenty-eight, huh? That might be enough that Bighawk notices."

Most of the ax-wielding men reflexively pulled back a bit as Rit grinned fearlessly. One brave man took a single step forward, however.

"I don't plan on boosting your count, so you better make it twenty-seven," he snarled.

"Oh, you don't say? I mean, I suppose that's true...what with you not being a human and all."

The one who'd stepped forward suddenly opened his mouth so wide that the corners began to split. Eventually, they tore, and the man's body grew to twice its size. His flesh was now a coppery red sort of color, and his muscles had grown swollen and large. His hands had merged with the two axes he'd previously been holding.

"Hey, ax demon, there's something I've always been curious about," Rit called.

"Oh? Maybe I'll answer you, if I feel like it. What is it?" the creature shot back.

"It must be pretty hard to wash yourself with hands like that, right? I'm sure that causes a number of problems, but doesn't the smell ever bother you?"

"You better watch your mouth, girl!"

The demon charged in, its reddish face turning a brighter hue at Rit's wisecrack.

Assuming a combative stance with a shotel in either hand, Rit engaged the demon.

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Al was back at the shop. The two guards who had looked after Al five days before were there, too, sticking around as protection. No one said a word as the sound of the rain hitting the roof resounded in the shop.

The plan was for Rit to catch the attackers she lured out by pretending to be Al and bring them back to hand over to the guards.

There was no proof that she would be attacked, but Red had said that the odds of it happening were high. Red himself was following Rit at a distance, just in case anything happened to her. That was why the two guards were in the shop.

Suddenly, there was a thud at the door. The closed sign was up, so it couldn't have been a customer. Al's expression tensed.

One of the guards drew the shortsword at his waist and approached the entrance. The other readied his halberd. Al himself pulled out his own shotel, which had been secretly delivered the night before. Al could feel his fear dissipate just from the simple act of drawing it. His new sword fit his hand perfectly, like it was an extension of himself. It felt far more natural than that expensive magic sword.

"Who is it?" the guard near the door asked.

"It's me."

Al had heard the voice before. It was the voice of the short man who had brought him the dubious shotel.

"He's one of Bighawk's men!" Al warned in a low but emphatic tone.

The guard nodded in understanding...and then unlocked the door.

"Huh?"

Al didn't understand what was happening. The two guards that were supposed to be there to protect him withdrew their weapons and nodded respectfully to the intruder as he entered.

This time, he was wearing a poncho over a thief's outfit, instead of the mage-style garb he'd had on before. There was a chainmail shirt sewed into the underside of his clothes that served as armor while hardly making any noise when he moved. The poncho was an expensive item, made from fire rat skin that boasted a high resistance to fire. Behind him were two bodyguards wrapped in black hooded cloaks.

"What an ungrateful child, using such a cheap little thing when Mr. Bighawk gave you such a nice gift already," the man said with a smirk.

"How...?" Al asked, incredulous.

"It's quite simple, really."

The man gave a gesture, and one of the bodyguards took two bags of silver coins out of his cloak and handed them over to the guards.

"Heh-heh, thank you, kindly."

"You were working with Bighawk?!"

"I'm sure Rit thought she was getting the drop on us, and letting her think that was the case was the safest choice. She's a right old

hero, so of course she would see through the magic hidden on that weapon and think to use it as a trap to lure us out. Her being out springing her little trap was the best time for us to pounce. We've been one step ahead the whole time."

Al readied his sword, but the man just snickered and tossed some sort of ball from inside his sleeve. The sphere popped at Al's feet and spread a sticky green substance all around.

"Wh-what is this?!"

"An adhesive bomb. May not look it, but I have an Alchemist blessing."

Curiously, the glue-like stuff didn't cling to the man's coat. Clearly, he'd covered it in some sort of resistant chemical beforehand.

"What are you going to do with me?!" Al demanded.

"Nothing bad. It's just that every revolution needs its figurehead, and Mr. Bighawk's a bit too dirty to play that part. There's another choice, too, but he's not from Southmarsh. On that point, though, you don't have any skeletons in your closet, and you've got that magnificent Weapon Master blessing. All we want is for you to be Southmarsh's little hero."

"What do you mean 'hero'...?"

"We're going to put you and Ademi together."

"Ademi?! Where has he been hiding?! Wait, don't tell me..."

A foreboding grin spread across the man's face, but he didn't answer.

"Whoops, can't be sticking around too long. Wouldn't want the folks around here to catch on. Let's get out while the getting's good."

Unable to resist at all, Al was carried away to Bighawk's residence.

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Amid the rows of shacks in Southmarsh, Bighawk's extravagant residence surrounded by a stout fence stood out like a sore thumb. It was a three-story mansion made of stone. As land in the area was so cheap, it covered a large circumference. Al was lying on top of a red carpet inside that very building. Despite the fact that he had been rather carelessly tossed to the floor, the lush, expensive carpet had cushioned his fall perfectly.

"What are you planning to do to me?!" While Al was acting brave, there was a tremor in his voice. The half-elf had been robbed of his shotel. He was stunned to discover that the courage he'd felt before had only been a false bravado granted by his blessing.

I'm just the same as I was back when I got scared of the dark... Al trembled in fear, fighting back tears with all his might.

“So you’re Al, huh?” The half-orc who beckoned to Al was more imposing than his rather average height and portly build first suggested.

“Are you Bi—...Mr. Bighawk, sir?”

Bighawk’s lips curled around his protruding fangs. Al could sort of understand that it was probably a smile.

“I am, indeed, brother. I’m the man who’s been looking after all of Southmarsh. No need to be too formal, since as far as I’m concerned, everyone in Southmarsh is my family. You can just call me Mr. Bighawk.”

The half-orc smiled in his own way while he approached. As his thick fingers plucked Al up by the shoulder, he finally noticed that the frightened boy was holding back tears.

“You’re a strong-willed one. Looks like my eyes didn’t deceive me.”

“Wh-what do you mean...?”

“Did they not tell you? I want to have you become a hero.”

Whatever Bighawk meant by that, Al didn’t understand.

“I should start from the beginning. First of all, I imagine you don’t need this part explained, but the terrible state of our Southmarsh lies at the heart of it all. As a fellow Southmarsh man, you know that as well as anyone. We’re outsiders. Outsiders who came from elsewhere with the hope of living here in Zoltan, and yet the people in the council pushed us all out here.”

“Yes, I know that...”

“That’s why I decided to rise above. I made a name for myself in the Thieves Guild. Unlike those lazy Zoltan good-for-nothings, I was raised in the slums of the capital of the Duchy of Daigan. The cushy life you can lead here is nothing compared to growing up there. I learned the way of poison and daggers in the City of Intrigue, Daigan, where the four great aristocrat families have been plotting against one another in the shadows for decades; I’m nothing like these frontier weaklings. I killed anyone who got in my way—ally or enemy. It made no difference. And no one had the spine to even try to get revenge. Cowards that they are, they all just ran away.”

As Bighawk expounded on a number of his own exploits, Al couldn’t help but grind his teeth as he was made to listen to the litany of cruel, terrible deeds.

“That’s how I built myself up, created a power that even those council guys couldn’t lay a hand on. Even that on its own would’ve been impressive enough, don’t you think?”

“...”

“It wasn’t enough for me, though. I knew I could stand even higher. If I were the one running Zoltan instead of those foolish,

apathetic, worthless men, there would finally be some real changes around here!”

“What does that have to do with coming after me?” Al asked.

“You heard of that drug I’ve been spreading around? Apparently, the council has been calling it ‘False Prophet,’ but its actual name is ‘Devil’s Blessing.’”

“Devil’s Blessing?”

“Yeah. See, originally, blessings were absolute. You could only have the one granted to you by Almighty Demis. That blessing decided a person’s livelihood and their role in life, and there was no way to change it. The purpose of people’s lives was to fulfill the role that God had granted them.”

Bighawk spread his arms wide.

“That doesn’t mean there’s never been people who’ve struggled to accept their God-given roles, however. In fact, most people couldn’t. They suffered under the disconnect between the role their blessings demanded and the life that they wanted to live, and eventually, they died having wasted their existences! I would’ve been no different! My blessing is Master Torturer. A garbage blessing that sentenced me to live out my life in some prison filled with screams of pain and terror! A hole in the ground where blood, sweat, and the smell of human excrement permeated everything! I ask you, who could accept that? I didn’t want that kind of a life. I wanted to be a man like my father, who was born on the dark continent, became a hussar, pillaged far and wide, killed all he could, and then died just as he lived! I wanted to be a powerful soldier who rampaged as he pleased!”

Al realized that the half-orc before him was the end result of rejecting one’s blessing like Red had described before.

“Devil’s Blessing was truly a gift to those of us who refused to reconcile with what God had given us. It bestows a new blessing and weakens the impulses of our innate ones. It’s a medicine that grants you the right to begin a new life. With it, you can be whoever you want.”

“A new blessing?”

“Devil’s Blessing is made using demons’ hearts. The variant going around right now was made from the hearts of fifty ax demons.”

“Demons’ hearts?!” Al exclaimed.

“I don’t know the details of the theory behind it. Who cares, right? All I needed was to figure out how to use it. With this new weapon at my disposal, I will become the king of Zoltan.”

At first, Al thought Bighawk meant that in some sort of metaphorical sense. Zoltan was a republic, with power split between the council and the mayor. Even though racist sentiments were common in Zoltan, there was no way that a nonaristocratic half-orc

like Bighawk would be allowed to become a member of the council. Much the same was true of becoming mayor as well, even if Bighawk spent a fortune on a campaign.

That was why Al thought the man meant a figurative *king*. When Al saw the intensity in Bighawk's eyes, however, he knew the man had meant it literally. He was serious about conquering Zoltan and ruling over its people.

"The Devil's Blessing has strengthened the citizens of Southmarsh, and because of its addictive qualities, they won't turn against me. I've got agents in and outside the council. All that's left is to light the spark that will set this powder keg off."

"A spark?"

"That would be you, Al... Hey, bring him in."

At Bighawk's command, a shadowy bodyguard, still cloaked despite being indoors, left the room. After a minute, he returned, carrying a boy bound with rope.

"Ademi!" Al shouted.

Hearing the other kid's voice, Ademi looked up. When he saw it was Al, his head drooped.

"I'm sorry... I never meant for it to be like this."

"Ademi..."

"I just... I just wanted to be a brave guard like my dad... I never knew things would wind up this way..."

Bighawk and Ademi had both admired their fathers and had similarly suffered over their dissatisfaction with their blessings. Unlike Ademi, however, there was no trace of compassion in Bighawk's expression. There was only ecstasy at the impending realization of his dream.

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That evening, Al was brought to a door leading out to the balcony of the estate. All of the green adhesive from the bomb had been washed away, and he had been made to change into new clothes. What's more, he'd also been equipped with a resplendent silver breastplate.

Ademi was next to him, still bound. He was wearing the same dirty, ragged clothes he'd likely been in for days.

"There won't be anything dangerous. All you have to do is just follow what your blessing commands," Bighawk said with a profound smile.

The half-orc opened the doors to the balcony, and a thundering cheer filled the air.

"Wh...?!" Al shouted.

Gathered below was a crowd of people so large they could not all

fit in Bighawk's enormous yard.

They were almost all residents of Southmarsh with tattered clothes and dirty faces. Their eyes, however, were sparkling in excitement as Bighawk raised his hands, and they let fly cheers of his name in response.

"Why...?"

As far as Al knew, Bighawk was the boss of Southmarsh, but he was not some beloved figure. Southmarsh was home to many immigrants, no small sum of which harbored racist feelings toward half-orcs. In the past, Al had heard a few people refer to Bighawk as "that damn pig."

"All it takes is the smallest opportunity to change public opinion." Bighawk laughed, his ample belly jiggling as he rested his thick fingers on top of it. "These people used to hate me for what I did to them, and now I stand here basking in their cheers. All it took was gathering up their complaints against the council and becoming the spokesman for their protest. The people want a hero."

Bighawk waved his log-like arms, an act that only elicited further cheering.

"Mr. Bighaaaaawk!" they cried.

What are you doing? He's a bad guy! He's caused you all so much pain! Don't fall for his tricks so easily! Al screamed in his mind.

Bighawk, feared for the countless cruel legends he'd inspired, was cheerfully waving to a mass of people who were singing his praises.

"Ladies and gentlemen. Just yesterday, I went to the Zoltan council and the guard station to protest."

The cheers ebbed as Bighawk began to address the people. Those still shouting were promptly shushed by those next to them. Everyone eagerly awaited what Bighawk was going to say next.

"My goal was, of course, to address the situation regarding the craven criminal who attacked young Al's family." The man motioned to Al.

An angry roar bellowed up from the crowd, but a raised hand from Bighawk swiftly quieted the hisses and jeers. The hostility for lawmen was almost palpable.

"I asked them why their guards couldn't find a single boy, and you know what they said? They said it was because you all were too disruptive."

Another outraged swell erupted.

"It goes without saying that this is just mere sophistry! The reason we spoke out is that justice was not being done! So tell me, in what world could the rightful carriage of justice be hindered by legitimate demands like ours?"

""Right! Yeah!"" Supporting cries came from every which way.

“That leaves just one possible explanation! The truth is that this miscarriage of justice is what the lawmen wanted all along. The criminal who attacked young Al’s family was none other than the captain of the guard’s son, Ademi! Those monsters have chosen their friend’s child over our pain! Over what is right and fair! Does that make you mad? Does that upset you? But that’s just how Zoltan is! We are outsiders here! No matter how many of us might die, the council and the guards and the rest of Zoltan won’t shed a single tear! Best they’ll do is tell someone to pick up the trash!”

An incensed bellowing swirled all around, now more intense than ever. Bighawk looked down in satisfaction as the throngs of people continued to work themselves up.

“But you people of Southmarsh are prudent and wise. You’ve been persecuted by the wealthy and left to fight your brothers for the most meager of scraps. All this time, you’ve been left to wonder if the lawmen are pulling the strings, or if indeed there is any proof of what has happened! Well, my brothers and sisters, you will have that proof!”

From behind Al and Bighawk, a bodyguard concealed beneath a cloak led Ademi and the two guards who had betrayed Al out; all three had been tied up.

“Heh-heh...”

The two guards were looking down at the floor, but there were smirks on their faces.

“These two fine people once served under the wicked council but have since learned the wrongness of their actions!”

The two men moved forward. As they bowed their heads low, the pair began to address the crowd.

“We would like to turn ourselves in! We were the ones hiding Ademi! It was all in order to cover up this whole mess. The plan was to write off Al’s and his family’s testimony, to brush off the people of Southmarsh’s claims—your claims—as lies!”

There was a momentary silence before the ocean of people below exploded in rage.

“Silence! Silence, everyone!” Bighawk called until finally, things settled back down.

Dammit! Al wanted to scream that it was a complete lie. The guards hadn’t put on a very convincing performance at all. Their entire confession had sounded incredibly forced. It should have been obvious to anyone giving it even a second thought that they were lying.

“It is a simple thing to get a man to believe a lie that he wants to believe,” Bighawk whispered in Al’s ear. The half-orc’s powerful fingers snaked their way around Al’s neck, a warning that Bighawk

could easily snap it at any time. Such a threat was more than enough to silence the frightened Al.

The guards continued their cheap farce for the crowd, and everyone responded exactly as Bighawk wanted. Their performance laid the blame for everything at the feet of the council and the guards. Everything from Southmarsh's poverty to Zoltan's frequent storms was blamed on those who made the laws and enforced them. When the performance of lies finally drew to a close, Bighawk took over again.

"Here is your proof. Is there anyone left who still doubts it? Is there anyone who still believes that the council and guards stand on the side of justice? Is there anyone who would doubt me?"

"“Mr. Bighaaaaawk! Our one and true boss!”" came the emphatic cheers.

"Very well! With this, we are all of us united now. So then the question becomes what to do about the problem? How do we change this unjust system? We should cast aside our patience and magnanimity! The time for that has passed!"

Ademi was forced to his knees.

"I can tell you here and now, this isn't just some shady Thieves Guild plot. Oh, no! This is justice being served! This is a revolution!"

Bighawk passed a shotel to Al.

"If the guards won't see justice done, then we shall carry it out ourselves! And if the council would prosecute us, then we have no need for the council anymore!"

Ademi's eyes were filled with terror as he looked up at Bighawk and then to Al.

"Claim the retribution that is rightly yours, Al! Bring down the blade of judgment on the criminal who attacked your parents! Cast the villain's head into the flames of revolution that we might establish a new Zoltan in this land!"

"W-wait, you're telling me to kill Ademi?!" Al asked, terrified and dumbfounded.

"Indeed. Whatever the events that may have led up to it, it is the plain truth that this child attacked your parents. You saw it yourself that night."

"B-but! You were the one who set him up to do that!"

"Not at all. It's true that I gave him the drug and the ax. I suppose I might have kept him safe after he'd run off, too, but that's all. Ademi gave in to the Devil's Blessing urges and attacked your parents in a murderous fit. He was the one who wanted you to suffer and die."

Ademi, who had been desperately looking to Al to save him, now brought his gaze to the floor, ashamed.

"Even before I ever got involved, he'd tormented you. You know better than anyone how many times he's beaten you up, right?"

“...That’s true, but...”

“What’s more, because of the Devil’s Blessing, Ademi has two blessings... If you cut him down, it will only increase your level all the more.”

Thud. There was a throb from Al’s blessing, telling him that there was an enemy before him.

That night, Ademi was trying to kill me with that ax. He’s the one who wanted to eliminate me, so he can’t complain if he winds up dead for it. He’s my enemy. There’s no need to hesitate to kill an enemy.

Al’s own thoughts swirled, blending with his blessing’s call to battle.

Either way, someone is going to be ending Ademi here, even if I don’t do it, right? I’ve got the best reason to do it, so it might as well be me.

Al drew his shotel, the pain from the night of Ademi’s attack now fresh in his memory. Hatred burned in his mind. The shame of the tears he had shed seared his soul.

At that moment, however, Al caught sight of his own face reflected in the blade of the shotel.

“Ah...” Al saw a terrified look on his own face. Suddenly, the urges egging him on were gone.

“I’ve made my choice.”

Raising his blade over his head, Al brought the weapon down. Bighawk broke into a grin. The ropes around Ademi gently slid to the floor. Shocked and relieved, Ademi looked up.

“Al...”

Bighawk’s smile quickly faded, and he turned to look at Al.

“Something wrong with your grip? Or are you still hesitating?” he asked, his voice a cool monotone.

“Neither. My sword did not desire to harm Ademi. I will only wield my blade against the things that I want to.”

“...I’m only going to ask one more time. Do you have no intention of reconsidering?”

“My shotel is for fighting my enemies, and Ademi isn’t one of them. I’m a weapon master! I might be able to fool others, but I can’t fool my sword,” Al declared.

“I see. On to the next plan, then.”

Bighawk raised his left hand, and the small man with the Alchemist blessing took an ax out of the item box at his hip.

“Ah, urgh...” Immediately, Ademi began to tremble at the sight of the thing.

“Ademi!” Al called.

“Don’t waste your breath. Let me tell you a little bit about Devil’s Blessing. By taking the drug, it transfers levels from your innate blessing to the new one. The more levels ceded, the weaker the

impulses of your innate blessing become. That's why the users experience such an intense feeling of liberation. When the level of the Devil's Blessing surpasses that of a user's innate one, however, it becomes incredibly addictive. That's right about when the symptoms of overdosing start showing up," Bighawk explained.

"Ademi, get ahold of yourself!" Al cried.

"It's particularly bad when someone has transferred all of their innate blessing's levels. The influence of the ax demon that was the basis of the medicine starts to appear. Just seeing an ax is enough for someone in that state to succumb to murderous urges. Stuff like that is behind all the recent attacks. It's a pretty convenient effect for my purposes, though."

Ademi pushed Al away.

Bighawk's admissions had been spoken too quietly to be heard by the masses below, but it was plain to everyone that something unexpected was occurring up on the balcony. Murmurs began to snake through the crowd.

"Al, you were a true hero. Even though he attempted to kill your family, you still chose the path of dialogue and reconciliation. However, Ademi—that small, pathetic child—sullied your noble efforts and cruelly responded by taking up an ax. Truly reprehensible and unforgivable. Al demonstrated with his life the futility of reconciliation with those craven beasts."

Bighawk shrugged in jest, then lowered his voice again.

"That's the gist of the script I had. How's it sound to you? If you've got any requests for points I should emphasize, I'll gladly take them into consideration... You should probably speak up quickly, though, before Ademi kills you."

Ademi leaped after the ax the alchemist was holding. Despair filled Al's heart, but he readied his sword to defend himself nonetheless.

"What?!"

Before Ademi's hand could reach the ax, however, it was split in two, and the alchemist collapsed to the ground, bleeding from a wound to his shoulder.

"What was it, 'I'm sure Rit thought she was getting the drop on us, and letting her think that was the case was the safest choice for us'? You said it yourself, didn't you? Making the opponent think they have the upper hand is the safest way."

The cloaked bodyguard who had carried Al around throughout all of this was now holding a bronze sword that'd split the steel ax in half and cut the alchemist down.

"Grab on, Al; we're jumping!" the cloaked man shouted as he grabbed Ademi.

Al clung to his neck.

“Wh-what?! Have you gone mad, Waverly?!”

Bighawk watched as the one he’d believed to be the bodyguard named Waverly grinned back at the half-orc from beneath the hood of a cloak. While he carried the two boys, the figure then leaped off the third-floor balcony.

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There were many different ways to change your appearance, from magical tools like cloaks of disguise to spells like Illusion or Transformation. It was just common sense to be on guard for traces of magic like that. Naturally, Bighawk had spared no expense when it came to sniffing out imposters, carefully deploying Detect to catch intruders.

“But there’s a blind spot there.”

Disguise was a common skill that utilized clothes, makeup, and impersonation. There weren’t many people who thought much of Disguise, since it focused on nonmagical methods of transformation. Most thought only a fool spent skill points on something that could be solved using magic. It was for that exact reason that I knew my facade would never be exposed.

That was why I left the investigation to Rit and followed the person I was going to conceal myself as, observing his movements and mannerisms. That was also why we left Al at the guard station, in order to find any guards who tried to get close to him. Sure enough, the two who did were secretly working with Bighawk. Thankfully, they’d discussed their plan in such detail while I was there in costume that I knew exactly how best to get Al and Ademi out safely.

“M-Mr. Red, right?! Maybe?! How are we going to land?!” Al exclaimed.

“Acrobatics Mastery: Slow Fall.”

While descending, I kicked against the wall here and there to reduce our momentum.

So long as there was a perch in arm’s reach, Slow Fall allowed the user to utilize that object to decrease their speed while dropping. Fly was strictly better, if you had access to it, of course. I never heard the end of it from Ares when I’d taken Slow Fall, but it proved to be invaluable to me because I was always scouting out ahead on my own.

I landed safely on the ground and gave Bighawk a little wave as he leaned out over the balcony and looked down, still unable to grasp what was happening. With Al and Ademi in tow, I made my escape. From behind, I could hear Bighawk’s enraged shouts as he realized what had happened. He was too far away to do anything about it at

that point, however.

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“Ademi, drink this.”

I handed a vial of medicine to Ademi as he stared blankly.

“It’s a little bitter,” I cautioned.

Ademi raised the vial like he was told. All of a sudden, his eyes widened as he groaned.

“Disgusting!” he shouted.

“Sorry, this stuff requires precise preparation, so I couldn’t add anything to fix the flavor.”

“Ugh...hmm? I kinda feel better...”

“It temporarily lowers your level. In a sense, it’s a sort of poison. It’s medicine the wild elves made to temporarily suppress the urges of blessings. I’m relieved that it worked on the Devil’s Blessing, too.”

“A wild elf medicine?! Where’d you learn that?!”

Al and Ademi both looked shocked.

“Since it inhibits your blessing, the holy church will get mad if they find out, so let’s keep this our little secret,” I said as I put my finger to my lips.

The two of them nodded vigorously in agreement. That traces of excitement crept into their expressions at the prospect of being in on a secret, despite the situation they were in, was a testament to the kind of fortitude children could demonstrate at times.

“All right, according to Rit, he should be around here...”

Rit’s investigation had been running full steam for the past few days. Supposedly, she’d found an excellent collaborator. Her ally had apparently discovered that Bighawk was holding Ademi, that he might be planning to use Al and Ademi for something, and even what his ultimate goal was.

Whoever Rit’s informant was, he had to have been pretty skillful to uncover all that. Rit had mentioned him being an adventurer who showed up in Zoltan pretty recently.

“He’s supposed to have a red-sheathed sword.”

Because almost all of Southmarsh was gathered at Bighawk’s mansion, the surrounding streets were rather quiet. The only thing to be heard was a baby crying from a far-off house, probably having been left behind for the gathering.

“If he’s waiting here, he must be a pretty capable Invisibility user.”

I couldn’t sense any presence at all. Fully alert, I looked around. When my gaze fell upon a shack to my right, a figure appeared from the shadows. It was a young man with a dark complexion and a

friendly sort of disposition. A longsword of a foreign make rested in a red sheath that had been fastened to his waist.

“Are you Red?”

“If you’re asking that, I guess that makes you the one that Rit mentioned. If I recall, she said your name was Bui?”

The young man flashed a cheerful smile, but I could sense a sharpness to him. Despite outward niceties, I could tell that letting my guard down around him was a bad idea.

“Yes, my name is Bui. I’ve transformed some spirits to look like Al and Ademi and spread them around the neighboring streets, so that should hopefully buy a little time.”

“Good thinking. Here’s hoping everything else goes as planned.”

“What are you talking about?” Al looked nervous, unable to follow our conversation at all.

“We have a plan to beat Bighawk,” I clarified.

Al’s eyes went wide in shock.

“Sorry for keeping you out of the loop like that. This is something that really needs to be discussed in depth with the two of you.”

Al and Ademi had a vital role to play in this. Truthfully, it wasn’t an exaggeration to say that they were the ones who were going to take down the crime boss.

“Red,” Bui suddenly cut in.

“I sensed it, too,” I replied. “Eleven of them, huh?”

Eleven creatures were approaching us. Nine of them had some respectable levels in Stealth. Doubtless, they were stalker demons, like the ones Rit had encountered.

“I’ll take half of them,” Bui said as he drew his sword.

He slipped into a stance with the sword in his left hand, his hips lowered, and his empty right hand thrust out in front of him. While I’d never seen such a posture before, it looked to be a trained technique rather than a simple reliance on skills. He seemed capable enough, however...

“I’ll take care of this. You should take the two of them to the planned spot,” I declared.

“I don’t mind, but will you be okay? We still don’t know their full strength yet,” Bui replied.

“All I have to do is make sure they don’t get past me. That won’t be a problem.”

“...That’s true enough. Very well, I’ll take responsibility for delivering the two of them.”

“Thanks.”

Nervous, Al looked up at me. “Mr. Red?”

“Bui here will explain what you need to do,” I answered.

“W-will you be okay? Aren’t there enemies on the way?”

“Yeah, I’ll be fine. I promise. We’re going to win this for sure. Now hurry up and go.”

I glanced at Bui, and he took the two of them by the hand.

“M-Mr. Red! Please train with me again sometime!” Al called.

“Sure thing, it’s a promise.”

With that, Bui led Al and Ademi away. Even so, the approaching foes did not waver, still moving after only myself.

“It’s really him...”

The one at the forefront of the approaching assailants was wearing asymmetrical, ornamental armor. It caused his left side to be slightly heavier than his right, which in turn meant his footfalls were the tiniest bit unbalanced. It was a rhythm that I knew well.

“Hey, Albert.”

“Show some respect, D rank.”

Albert had a rounded executioner’s blade drawn as he fixed me with a piercing stare.

Chapter 5

The Man Who Strove to Become a Hero

Albert, nine stalker demons with black cloth covering their faces, and an expressionless Bighawk stood before me.

What's Bighawk doing here? He shouldn't have been able to catch up to me that quickly.

“Martial Art: Swallow's Approach!”

Leaving me no time to ponder my surprise, Albert immediately loosed an attack. We'd been fifteen paces apart, but he'd closed that distance in the blink of an eye and brought his weapon down toward me. Swallow's Approach was a Martial Art intended to allow you to move at high speed to strike the opponent. The path the sword would take was easy to read, however, because Martial Arts always moved in fixed patterns. Albert's attack was faster, but I just dodged it with a single step back and to the left. No sooner had I evaded than the heavy blade suddenly switched directions, almost as if it had bounced on something.

It shouldn't have been possible for Albert's body to move so soon after unleashing a Martial Art. The motion had impossible timing. Albert's sword closed in on me, seemingly drawn toward my neck. There was a metallic screech.

“What?!”

Shock crept in at the corners of Albert's arrogant expression. His sword's arc had been diverted. The edge of the weapon had sailed just over my head, trimming a couple of strands of hair as it passed.



“You parried my cursed sword with a cheap toy like that?!”

I had drawn my bronze sword and parried the slash aimed at my neck in a single motion.

So this is the power of a cursed sword... It was said that there was a kind of demon on the dark continent that possessed a skill allowing them to create blades that housed a kind of hunger for death. If I'd tried to catch it head-on without deflecting it, that slash likely would've cut right through my sword. Albert was wielding a demon weapon, and the difference between such an item and my mass-produced bronze sword couldn't have been clearer.

“To be able to evade that attack...and with such a terrible sword. You failing to dodge my attack in the shop back then was just an act, I take it? Did you use some Martial Art I don't know about it?”

Back when he attacked me in the shop? I thought. It hadn't been a special skill granted by a blessing, just simple swordsmanship. Evidently, Albert had gotten it into his head that I had used a secret ability, however.

Albert and I both slowly backed off a bit and established some distance.

“My eyes weren't playing tricks on me. You really are a person destined to become a hero. Just like me,” Albert sneered.

“Why is Bighawk here?” I asked, more concerned about the half-orc's surprising presence than anything else.

“That's...” Sensing that he was being ignored, Albert's expression twisted slightly.

“Because this Bighawk is merely a shell,” Bighawk interjected as Albert tried to explain.

The voice was soothing to the ears, like the chime of a bell. It was very clearly not Bighawk's voice.

“...So that's it. That solves the last lingering question. This is the answer to the origin of the drug and how Bighawk's people somehow sacrificed fifty mid-tier demons. I'd been having trouble deducing that part. You're some contract demon that's been working behind the scenes,” I declared.

Bighawk's face contorted hideously.

“I am one who grants wishes. This creature's wish was to become the king of Zoltan. Thus, I lent my strength. This man was incapable and ignorant, so I took control of his body. In his stead, I did everything within the realm of his capability and personality in order to guide him to become king. His consciousness remains. He sees and feels the same things that I see and feel. I'm sure he has enjoyed the gourmet cuisine and exquisite women as well. There is the minor downside of being unable to move even a single finger of his own

volition, but I believe he has been satisfied with the outcome thus far.”

A contract demon. There were many famous stories about people who made deals with such beings in order to fulfill their wishes. Such tales usually ended tragically for the person fool enough to agree to the arrangement. Usually, their soul was consumed to increase the contract demon’s blessing, or it was somehow worked into the foul thing’s weapon.

Simply put, the one who came out on top of such agreements was always the demon. By creating a pact, contract demons became able to use extraordinary magic they normally didn’t have access to. So great was that power that it could even alter reality somewhat.

Upper-tier demons had a skill that elicited obedience from lower-tier demons. According to demonologists, lower-tier demons also had a skill that fostered loyalty to their superiors. This was more than just the occasional impulse of a blessing.

By using that power, the contract demon had summoned ax demons and sacrificed them. Doubtlessly, the knowledge of the drug itself had come from the demon as well.

“An upper-tier demon...,” I muttered.

Even if it isn’t one specialized in hand-to-hand combat, I don’t think I can face it head-on and win.

If Ruti, or Danan, or Yarandralla, or any of my other old comrades were here, such an opponent wouldn’t be a problem. If I’d had Thunderwaker and the rest of my gear from the old days, I’d probably be all right, too.

Unfortunately, I was alone without a single piece of magic equipment. All I had was a single bronze sword. It really wasn’t any sort of condition to be engaging with a powerful opponent.

“Looks like you and I both are unable to fight properly,” I called.

“...” The possessed Bighawk’s expression didn’t change, but I was sure my words had hit the mark.

“If you were serious, you should’ve been able to take control of Zoltan much quicker than this. Not to mention easier. So why haven’t you?” I pressed.

“...Why do you suppose?” the demon replied with its own question.

“You know, I’ve studied a little about your kind. I’ve read a few papers regarding contract demons. Your pact contains enormous power, but at the same time, you can’t control all of it. Isn’t that right?”

“What of it?”

“The contract was to make Bighawk the king of Zoltan. So you took control of his body and committed all those atrocities in order to

raise the man's standing. All the while, however, you were stuck as the number two of the Thieves Guild. I'm sure that was mortifying."

The demon's expression twisted ever so slightly.

"It's not for nothing that Zoltan is regarded as a lazy town. The mayor, all the guild chiefs, even the criminal underworld of the Thieves Guild—everything here is determined by seniority," I continued.

Promotion to the top of anything in this town was based on eldership. After reaching a certain level within the bureaucracies, accomplishments and blessings and even quality of character held no sway when it came to getting ahead. Older people had more power, and younger people just needed to wait patiently until the current ruling generation died off. There was no room for ambition; Zoltan was too lazy for such things.

"Power struggles are a pain in the ass. Even if you don't try very hard, you'll get your turn in the end. Everyone around here is fine with that. Bighawk was called the number two of the Thieves Guild, but it wasn't like he was officially the second-in-command. It was just an observation of his relative power within the group. No matter how skilled and outstanding you were, it was still going to be another twenty years of waiting until you became the head of the guild."

"...Good grief, this is such an irredeemable town." The demon placed a hand over its eyes and shook its head as if lamenting the state of things.

"I've granted similar wishes before. It should've been quite a simple feat with my knowledge, judgment, and the power of my blessing. I must confess, I've been bested. No matter how great my accomplishments, no matter how much collateral I tried to provide, the answer was always no. Every time, I was merely told that wasn't how things were done here. The people of Zoltan are truly, irredeemably slothful."

"Bound by the contract, you couldn't cast Bighawk's body aside. Without fulfilling the wish, you were stuck," I said.

Breaking the contract meant releasing Bighawk's soul. That would restore anything the contract maker had given up, and the contract demon would lose several of its levels.

In other words, it was a considerable loss that a demon was unlikely to accept.

"Faced with an impossible choice, you turned your attention to Albert, an outsider like you," I reasoned.

It was common knowledge that Albert was close with the Thieves Guild. Several accounts indicated that Bighawk was the mediator between Albert and the guild. Still bound by the contract with Bighawk, the demon could not use any power unavailable to the half-

orc, but by signing another contract, it could produce a miracle while still in Bighawk's body.

"It's not as if I can just make a deal with anyone. It requires a certain fundamental strength of will in addition to some amount of darkness enshrouding their heart. In that regard, Zoltan is perhaps the worst place imaginable. Everyone here has their points of discontent, however minor they might be, but they've all just given up and accepted that things can't be changed. It was quite the lucky break that someone like Albert was hanging around," the demon openly admitted.

Albert had the blessing of the Champion, a hero from birth. Unfortunately, he'd failed to live up to the standards of his blessing. He wasn't weak by any means, but he'd been unable to achieve B-rank status on his own in Central. The best he'd ever done was elevate himself via the achievements of his party. Even then, he was still just a member of a B-rank party—not a B ranker himself.

The reasons for that were many. Albert could've lacked the necessary advice on what sort of skills were good for him to take. It was also possible that he just wasn't all that talented. There was even the chance it was all because Albert wasn't particularly good at working with others.

Regardless of the reason, the end result was that Albert was unsatisfied with his lot in life. Understandably so, of course, since he was supposed to be a Champion.

"In Zoltan, Albert could get by as a B-rank adventurer. When he first arrived, the only B rankers were former mayor Master Mistorm, Galatine the famed Adventurers Guild member, Bishop Shien of the holy church, and Guard Captain Moen. When the situation demanded it, those four would form a party to handle things only a B-rank party could. It was a truly staggering shortage of skilled labor. As such, even if Albert was a little lacking, so long as the people of Zoltan could squint their eyes and call him a B ranker, it was good enough."

Albert's face warped slightly as the demon spoke. Even if everything it said was true, hearing it was doubtlessly unpleasant.

I'd come to Zoltan after Albert, but I'd heard things were particularly rough before he'd arrived. The four B rankers at the time had unsurprisingly been very busy. While Moen was young in those days, it wouldn't have been out of the question for the other three members of that party to have retired. What's worse, their regular jobs denied them a fair amount of combat experience. Supposedly, they'd had some close calls with foes that should've otherwise been beneath them.

Albert's rank was never revised, even after he left his party in Central. So when he came to Zoltan, he was immediately welcomed as

a B-rank adventurer. There was little other option than to turn to him anyhow. Such was how Albert became a frontier hero.

"I came to utterly despise Zoltan," Albert spat. "Its adventurers are nothing but trash who procrastinate on their quests. It's filled with incompetents who start grumbling the moment you take your eyes off them. How was I supposed to accept people like that as my allies? Reconciling that they were B-rank adventurers was an insult. Who could accept that?! What does living among such people make me?! This is a town where defeating a mere owlbear is cause for celebration! Pretending to be a hero out here means nothing! If I die in Zoltan, my life will have been a waste!"

The darkness in Albert had slowly grown every time the locals hailed him as a hero. Each time he observed the easygoing happiness of his comrades, the anger festered and grew.

The contract demon had taken advantage of that.

"But don't you worry, D rank. I'm going to become a hero. I may have signed a deal with a demon, but I refuse to raise my sword in the name of evil."

"How can you say that after everything that's happened? People have already died," I shot back.

"Necessary sacrifices. My desire is for Zoltan to become united and join in the battle against the demon lord's army. I want it to become a town with the strength and determination to be able to do that. Revolution must necessarily be nourished with the blood of sacrifices," Albert explained.

"Wait, the demon lord's army?" I asked, confused.

"Hear the whole story out, Red; I'm sure you'll come to understand that what we do is by no means evil," the demon controlling Bighawk said, cutting in. "The forces that are attacking this continent of Avalon—what we call the Radiant Continent—are being led by a different faction that differs from any previous demon lord. Many of our kind have been subjugated by the current demon lord, and so they obey. There are those of us who have yet to fall in line, however. We work with a group of dwarves who have retained their influence in our homeland. Together, we have organized a resistance to combat the demon lord's army...though our current situation is unfavorable."

"What does that have to do with you being here?" I inquired.

"The reason I am here is, of course, to fulfill this half-orc's wish. At the same time, however, it is also because I wanted Zoltan to join the fight against the demon lord's forces."

Hearing that from a demon was no small surprise.

"Albert's wish is to fight alongside the Hero and defeat the demon lord. In his contract, he didn't pledge his soul but instead promised to

devote all his life to vanquishing the demon lord. What do you think? Surely you are able to recognize that is by no means a malicious agreement.”

“Is that true, Albert?” I asked.

“It is.” Albert met my gaze straight on. Ambition was burning in his eyes. “The demon granted me power in the form of my Vorpall Blade, a cursed sword capable of killing any monster! What’s more, the Devil’s Blessing holds the power to grant even worthless blessings the strength to fight. With these two tools at my command, I will seize control of the council and become the governor-general. Once Zoltan is fully mobilized, I will lead our forces to join the Hero’s battle!” Albert roared. No doubt, he envisioned a scene of the demon lord’s forces amassing while he stood shoulder to shoulder with Ruti and Danan. Behind him, soldiers would wave their spears as they cheered in reply to his rousing call.

“I am Albert the Champion, not some adventurer who can only get by in this backwater town! I will become a man worthy of my blessing! A hero worthy of fighting the demon lord! My true self!”

I, a man who had left the Hero’s party, and Albert, a man whose sights were set on the very thing I’d cast away, stood opposite each other. We’d both been sidelined from the fight, but that was where our similarities ended.

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Outside Bighawk’s mansion, the residents of Southmarsh stood confused. Despite guardsmen having protected Ademi, Al had spared the other boy. The two had then been spirited away by some other unknown person.

Bighawk had frantically withdrawn into his estate. One of his henchmen had told the crowd to wait, but it had been some time since that order. The longer the people went without an update, the greater their unease. Eventually, arguments began to break out amid the throngs. Things escalated to the point where brawls were likely to erupt at any moment.

“O-oy! Not good!” cried a man near the entrance. Clattering armor and countless footsteps could be heard rumbling toward Bighawk’s mansion. A line of halberds bobbed, gleaming in the setting sun.

“I-it’s the guards! And they’re armed to the teeth!”

All at once, Bighawk’s manor was surrounded, encircled in steel. Guardsmen usually donned light armor while on patrol, but today

they wore steel breastplates, chain-mail tunics, and heavy half plate. Longswords and crossbows hung at the waist of every lawman. The guards of Zoltan only dressed in such attire during emergencies.

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At some point, the sky had been died red by the setting sun.

“Do you understand what’s happening here, D rank?” Albert asked, his sword still pointed at me.

“Mostly,” I replied, my bronze sword still drawn and at the ready. While we exchanged words, we both were prepared to engage at a moment’s notice.

“...Do you remember when I tried to get you to join my party before?”

“I mean, it wasn’t that long ago.”

“You really were feigning your own incompetence back then. I knew my eyes didn’t lie.”

“And what if you’re right?”

“Then I’ll say it one more time; join me, Red. You are a man capable of becoming a hero...just like I am.”

Albert lowered his weapon and instead extended a hand to me. We were only about fifteen paces apart. Albert could close that distance in a single move. Even with his offer, there was still a smoldering tension that hung about the air.

“I don’t know why you were hiding yourself, but people with power have a responsibility to wield it. You, too, must surely have a blessing unfit to be wasted out here in the frontier, just like mine.”

“You give me too much credit.”

“Quit playing dumb! That strength of yours is the genuine article!” Albert shouted. “So what will you do, D rank? Will you join the fight and become a legend, or will you defeat me and become lionized as the man who saved Zoltan?! Which will it be?!”

“So, I’ll become a hero, then?”

“Yes, a hero! Zoltan’s fate, maybe even that of the entire world, rests on your decision! Can you feel the surge of adrenaline?! Right now, at this very moment, the future is being shaped in this backwater town!”

At some point during his shouting, a manic grin had appeared on Albert’s face. He had finally become the kind of person he wanted to be, even if all he was clinging to was self-importance without any real foundation in reality.

“It’s about time,” I muttered.

“What’d you say?!”

“Sorry, Albert.”

The sound of countless approaching footfalls caught Albert's ear, and the man's face stiffened.

"Y-you... How could you...? This was supposed to be settled by us, the heroes, dueling it out..."

"I don't want to become a hero."

That day was not to be the stage upon which this incident was resolved. Neither Albert nor I would be made a hero.

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The residents of Southmarsh made it clear they intended to resist to the last. Even though they knew it was hopeless, Bighawk had emboldened them enough that they were willing to turn on the approaching guardsmen. They were determined to make sure Zoltan felt their wrath, even if it was a losing battle.

In truth, the ones pushing for an attack were plants that Bighawk had spread throughout the crowd beforehand. Most people were only going along with what others were saying and exchanged nervous looks as weapons brought from Bighawk's mansion were passed around.

From afar, Captain Moen watched as the scene unfolded. "They've got numbers on their side, but even if they've got armaments, they have no armor," he murmured.

At best, around half of the people at the forefront of the crowd sported some kind of protection.

"I mean, yeah. They aren't soldiers, and this isn't a battlefield," a nearby guard observed.

"...True enough," Moen responded in an exhausted tone.

The only reason Zoltan's lawmen had deployed in full regalia was the hope that such a sight would break the mob's spirit. Their presence did have a measurable impact, but it still wasn't enough to get them to lay down their weapons. One last push of some kind was needed.

"Captain!" called a man who looked to be out of breath as he hurried over.

"What is it?"

"It's Ademi!"

"What?! You found him?!"

Standing behind the guard who had just arrived was a dark-skinned young man with two young boys. Despite knowing most everyone in Zoltan, Moen had never met Bui, but it hardly seemed the time to worry about such a thing. The captain quickly discarded his sense that something was off about the man.

"Ademi!"

“Dad!”

Parent and child enjoyed a happy embrace.

“I’m sorry, Dad... I...”

“As long as you’re okay, it’s fine, Ademi. Whatever apologies you need to make, I’ll stand with you and apologize, too. And if there’s anyone you need to make amends with, I’ll be there with you for that as well. But you don’t have to say anything to me—you’re my son.”

“Dad...!”

“I’m sorry to interrupt during your touching reunion, but...” Bui trailed off for a moment before continuing. He did look truly apologetic for his interjection. “I believe it’s best we settle this all sooner rather than later.”

Moen and Ademi both blushed a tiny bit as they nodded.

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Guards and Southmarsh residents stood with their eyes locked on each other. Each side was ready to charge at the drop of a hat. The difference in equipment and training was clear as night and day, but the citizens had a highly defensible position in Bighawk’s fenced-off mansion. It was practically a fortress. Many believed it at least afforded them a chance.

“Tch, now ain’t this a pretty pickle,” a Southmarsh man holding a spear muttered to himself.

Those entrenched deeper in Bighawk’s property couldn’t see the armored guards, but those closer to the property’s edges readily understood just how outmatched they were. Many were considering running, but the estate was surrounded on all sides. Surrender likely wasn’t an option, either, as it’d only elicit attacks from someone behind.

“Nothin’ we can do now. Guess we were fools fer believin’ Mr. Bighawk.”

“No kidding.”

Caught between their enemy and their allies, those at the front of the mob silently prayed for even the slightest chance of escape. They wished with all their might for something that would allow them to cast down the weapons they’d been handed before things finally snapped and turned into a mistake that couldn’t be undone.

“Everyone!”

A child’s shout resounded through the crowd. The circle of guardsmen split, and two boys walked down the path formed from the opening. They both looked nervous, but there was a determination in their eyes that was clear for all to see.

“Isn’t that Al?! And beside him is that son of a bitch Ademi!”

A restless murmur spread through the Southmarsh ranks.

“Fly.” Bui used a spell, granting the boys invisible magic wings that carried them into the air. The two of them rose into the sky, stopping at a height where everyone was likely to see them best.

“Everyone, please!” Al shouted again.

“Al! What happened?! Did the guards catch you?!” someone called from down below.

“You have it wrong! I’m here by my own choice. And Ademi is, too,” Al corrected.

“He’s right,” Ademi confirmed.

Waves of excited confusion passed through the crowd.

Al had been considering what was best to say to the assembled people from Southmarsh. His and Ademi’s role was to stop the battle before it could begin. Bui had said that they were the ones best suited for such a job.

Should I tell the whole story? Should I make Ademi apologize? Should I scream that they were all being deceived by Bighawk? Al wondered as he hovered in place.

Bui had given Al a script scrawled on a piece of paper that now rested in the boy’s pocket. Floundering for what to do, Al reached after the little note Bui had given him.

No.

He then crumpled it and shifted his hand to the hilt of his shotel. After closing his eyes for a moment, Al finally addressed the crowd.

“Let’s go home, everyone. Nothing has happened yet, and no one’s been hurt. So let’s just go home.”

“What?!” came someone’s exclamation.

“Ademi and I are friends, and come tomorrow, we’ll play together again. So let’s all just go home.”

“Don’t be stupid! The boy you call your friend tried to kill your parents!”

“No, that wasn’t Ademi. It was a demon in his form. And if you all keep taking that drug, you’ll end up becoming demons who’ll hurt your own friends as well. We need to walk away from this before it’s too late.”

Al grabbed Ademi’s hand. In response to the gesture, Moen immediately raised his right hand, sending a signal to the guards. The captain’s men moved aside and created a means of egress from Bighawk’s mansion. One illuminated by the setting sun.

“...Al, are you saying you’ve forgiven him?” a man at the front of the mob asked.

“I am.”

Immediately, there was a clanging sound as the man threw down his spear. Nervously, he began to leave.

“O-oy,” someone called from behind, trying to stop the first one from abandoning the fight.

“This fight was to get vengeance for Al. I don’t have a death wish. If Al’s forgiven Ademi, then I don’t have any more reason to fight.”

Clang. Clang. Cla-cla-cla-clang...

One after another, weapons clattered to the ground as the people of Southmarsh began to make their way home. The battle was over. Many had never really wanted a fight in the first place. Much was owed to the work Red, Rit, and Moen had done setting the correct scene as well. More than anything, however, Al and Ademi had been the ones who’d stopped the war before it had begun.

The two boys watched the many relieved residents of Southmarsh leave the premises flanked on either side by equally alleviated guards.

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“Why?! Whyyyyyy?!” Albert cried, indignant. His bloodshot eyes bulged from their sockets, and his hair was disheveled. Albert and the others who had come with him stood surrounded by Zoltan guards.

Even though nine among Albert’s group were mid-tier demons, they were stalker demons—assassins. Such creatures only had the upper hand when they possessed the advantage of stealth or another means of controlling the situation. They weren’t well suited for a head-on battle against an enemy that outnumbered them.

“It seems you’ve really underestimated our town,” called a tall man who stood with the guards. Staring Albert down was the former strongest adventurer in Zoltan and one of the leaders of the Adventurers Guild, Galatine.

“This is...” The contract demon possessing Bighawk could not disguise its disappointment. Listlessly, the thing turned to look at Red. “Is this really the best way? Some of these men could die trying to take us in, you know. If you fought, this might end without anyone getting hurt.”

“I’m just a D-rank adventurer—and an apothecary at that... It’s not my place to arrest you. That responsibility belongs to those that uphold the law. They’re the ones trained for it,” I replied.

“Whyyyyyy?!” The force of Albert’s shout caused the surrounding guards to take a half step back reflexively.

“Albert.”

“You could’ve become a hero! Zoltan would have been forever in your debt! So why?! You have the strength to accomplish so much; how can you cast it aside?!”

“...Because I’m happy as I am. If I can stay here with Rit and keep running my little apothecary, that’s enough for me.”

"I can't accept it! Let me at least fall at the hands of a hero as a villain! Grant me that much at least! Give my life some amount of meaning! I'm Albert! The Champion! Not like this, arrested by the guards like some pathetic, run-of-the-mill criminal!"

"Stop it, Albert!" Surprisingly, it was the contract demon who called out to the incensed man.

Albert paid no heed, however, raising his sword and charging right for me. His deadly cursed weapon was aimed directly at my neck.

There was a flash of bronze.

Clang!

A metallic impact echoed, and a sword hilt fell to the ground.

With a blank look, Albert stared at the stump where his right hand had been just a second prior.

"So that's how it is?" asked Albert.

"..."

"You really could've defeated me at any point then..."

Crimson tears welled up in Albert's eyes.

"If you had wanted to, you could have dealt with my plotting at any point? That's just too...too much..."

Falling to his knees, Albert covered his face with his remaining hand.

"A hero isn't something you become by being strong," I said.

"Going to lecture me now?" Albert spat acidly.

"That's not it at all. I'm trying to say I was never right for the position... Albert, I wanted you to be the one to save Zoltan in its moment of need. You, the man who was always struggling, striving to become a hero more than anyone else. I wanted it to be you, not me."

It wasn't a lie. While Albert was a flawed man with a poor temper and a fundamental lack of strength, it had never kept him from working to overcome his inhibitions. Dragging unreliable party members along behind him, he fought to become someone worthy of the position he'd been handed.

"To me, no matter your flaws, you were Zoltan's hero," I declared.

I can't say for sure how Albert felt after hearing my words. I didn't have skills that allowed me to sense emotions or read minds. What I know for certain is that after I'd said my piece, Albert hung his head limply and made no further effort to resist arrest.

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The five days after the incident passed by rather quickly.

"How about now? Is it ready yet?"

"Mm, just a little bit longer."

I dipped a hand into the bath to check the temperature. It was still a little tepid.

Rit and I were in our newly constructed bathroom that Gonz had built. We'd decided to test it out immediately and were just in the process of heating the bath. The room had a large tub that could fit about three people and a smaller basin-shaped one next to it.

In a small adjoining room, there was a stove with a protruding pipe that carried heat to the bathtub. The furnace was of a special design that allowed you to open the pipe to turn the bathroom into a sauna.

There were various kinds of public bathhouses that dotted Avalon. Cleanliness staved off disease, so many had cropped up over the years. If you asked me, however, I thought the Zoltan stove-and-pipe-style ones were pretty handy.

In the capital, they would light a fire outside and use a setup that enabled them to have heat radiate from beneath the floor. It was a system that allowed the water to get hot much more quickly but had the downside of not being able to control the fire from inside the bath itself.

Admittedly, Rit could've always heated our bathwater with her spirit magic, but that method made precise adjustments difficult. Usually such an attempt resulted in boiling water. Plus, having to use magic somewhat defeated the point of trying to relax with a bath in the first place.

"All right, that should do it!" I announced.

"Hooray!"

Turning around, I saw that Rit had already gotten undressed, though she was still covering herself with a bath towel.

"Huh? Wait...!"

"Hurry up and get undressed, Red!"

"We agreed to swimsuits!"

"Wuss!"

Grrr! If that's the way Rit wanted to play it, then I had no choice. Rit was clearly okay being naked, so there wasn't any real reason for me to feel differently. I couldn't help but feel somewhat embarrassed, though. It was tough to know exactly where I should've been looking.

Rit and I faced each other as we slid into opposite sides of the bath wearing nothing at all.

""Ahhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhh!"

We both let fly a comforted sigh that filled the room.

"I'm so tired," Rit said.

"Me too. It's been a while since the last time I seriously fought. My muscles are still sore," I replied.

"Heh."

Suddenly, my ribs were jabbed by Rit's toe.

"Geh." A dull, sore ache ran through my stomach. As revenge, I did the same to her. Rit made a similar sort of pained sound. The recent commotion was the first time she'd had to really push herself in a while as well. She was no doubt aching just as badly as I was.

"I guess it really starts to be a problem if you don't get some proper exercise from time to time," I said.

"I dunno. It's not like stuff like this is going to be happening all the time," Rit replied.

We both let out another long exhale. Floating a bit in the bath felt good, so I closed my eyes and slid down into the water.

"It was a good idea to get a bath made," Rit mumbled.

We'd used the reward for our part in resolving the trouble in Zoltan to get a bathroom added to our home. The addition had only cost 130 payril, a fairly low price. As an expression of gratitude for all Rit and I had done, the carpenters in our neighborhood banded together and finished what should have been an eight-day job building the bathroom in only five. I made lunch for them all every day, something they enjoyed immensely. Several times I was told not to hesitate if Rit or I ever wanted another room built.

When all was said and done, we still had a bit of reward money left. I'd been considering putting it to use building a greenhouse out in the yard or perhaps a brewing room so I could try making some medicinal alcohol.

Something soft brushed against my chest.

"Mm?"

Opening my eyes, I saw Rit right in front of me with a mischievous grin on her face. Evidently, I had felt Rit's breasts. She'd used Stealth to get close to me without disturbing the water.

Normally, I would've brushed it off as her usual sort of screwing around, but it took everything I had to keep my cool.

"Eh-heh." Rit was smiling, but her face was beet red. So much so that it was clearly more than just the heat of the water. She always flirted in the most extreme ways, even though she got embarrassed from it herself.

"Oh?" I grabbed on to Rit's shoulder and spun her around so that her back slotted up against my chest and then hugged her tight.

"Mmmmm." Rit was doing her best to sound calm, but it was obvious that her body had tensed up. It relaxed just as quickly, however, and she nestled close. Her body was warm.

"Hey, Red."

"What?"

"Is this really okay? If you had gone with Albert, you might have been able to rejoin the Hero's party. Even Ares may have reconsidered

things by now.”

“I’m not sure how things would’ve gone down with Albert had I been the same as when I first arrived in Zoltan. As I am now, though, there was never a chance of me taking his offer.”

“Ruti and the others might be struggling without you, you know. They might even want you to come back.”

There was an unease in Rit’s voice. I was going to have to make this as clear as possible so there were no more misunderstandings.

I squeezed Rit tight and pressed my nose into her blond hair. It smelled good.

“Even if they did, I’m not going to go back. There are other people with the strength to help the Hero. Had things played out differently, Albert could’ve been one of them. I’m sure there are plenty more potential heroes wandering the land, but there’s only one Rit, and you’re here with me.”

Almost immediately I was dissatisfied with how vague that statement sounded.

“Hmm, that’s not quite what I mean. I guess I just have to be up front.”



“?”

“I love you, Rit. Really, really love you. Whatever amount you might think I love you, I guarantee the actual feeling is at least a hundred times more than that.”

“Wh—hu-huh...?!”

“That’s why I’m going to stay here. No matter what anyone else might say. What I want more than being a hero is to be by your side.”

Rit didn’t have her bandanna to hide behind, so she slid down into the water until it covered the bottom half her face to hide how happy she was.

Lately, it had felt like Rit was always nervous about something whenever she was with me. After I confessed so openly, however, that unease seemed to vanish in an instant. Immediately, our slow, peaceful, everyday lives returned.

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Zoltan’s prison sat on the outskirts of the northern side of the town’s central district. It was also directly next to the residence of the governor-general, Lord William. The stable and barracks were also nearby, where the forty drake knights he commanded were stationed. There were cells at the guard’s station, but those were primarily used to hold suspects and question them. It was customary for those deemed guilty, even if their case had not yet gone to trial, to be held at the prison.

That was where Albert, Bighawk, and their coconspirators were confined.

Convicted felons were sentenced to repaying the community by working to develop the surrounding land under the watchful eye of Lord William. The truth of the matter was that the governor-general merely passed off that sort of work to his subordinates, so he wasn’t really involved. The hope was that such work would break the felons of their ways enough that they could be admitted into the militia.

While that was the purported goal, the majority of criminals couldn’t cover the cost of their own food and shelter and were therefore sold off into debt-slavery. Only those with large fortunes to their names or those judged too useful to be sold off evaded this fate.

“Hey, Bighawk,” called a prison guard with a club at his waist.

The half-orc was sitting cross-legged in a cell. He turned his fearsome eyes to the jailer.

“Interrogation time.”

“I thought there wasn’t anything planned today?”

“The plan changed.”

“Any particular reason?”

“Not for the likes of you. Now get your ass out here.”

The guard took the club in his hand. While Bighawk did as commanded, he clearly found the whole exercise rather tiresome. His hands had been cuffed, and his fingers had been bound to keep him from using any magic or other techniques. Shuffling to the interrogation room, he sat back down in a chair. A thick steel door locked itself as it was shut behind him.

Activating spells or skills required specific, precise movements. Finger bindings disallowed that. There were those abilities that could be used even without hands—or to escape from bindings. A prison in Zoltan did not have such magical implements, however. A few thousand payril for a single set of handcuffs, regardless of how special they were, was simply too great.

“How much longer?” Bighawk asked.

“Keep your mouth shut until you’re told to speak,” the guard shot back.

“This must be a waste of time for you, too, right? Can you not just haul me out here after whoever it is actually arrives?”

The guard sighed. He’d been told that this half-orc had committed some particularly heinous crimes. Doubtless, the man assumed that Bighawk had been summoned to an interrogation room merely to be read his guilty conviction and sentenced to death. Defying the expectations of many, the Thieves Guild had stayed surprisingly quiet in the matter of the half-orc. The guard had to wonder if perhaps they were glad to be rid of such a treacherous presence in their organization.

Bighawk had worked aggressively to make a name for himself and rise through the ranks. Such actions were utterly removed from the standard way the people of Zoltan lived. It was practically heretical. Even his supposed comrades in the Thieves Guild were unsympathetic.

How long is this guy going to stay cool? Is he going to lose it when he finally realizes there’s no help coming for him? Am I going to have to restrain this tub of lard?

While the jailer was looking forward to the moment when Bighawk finally lost his composure, he was also depressed at the thought of just how much work it was going to be for him to deal with the cleanup.

Bang. Bang. There was a knock on the steel door.

“All clear on this side,” the guard responded.

Knocking was a precaution they had in place to avoid a door ever being opened while the prisoner was uncuffed.

A hand turned a key, earning a clicking sound from the lock, and the door opened with a groan. Two men stepped in. One was another

prison guard; the other...

"Would it be possible for you both to wait outside? I'd like to have a private conversation."

"I'm afraid we can't—"

"I've received authorization."

"...Okay. When you're done, give a shout so we can let you out."

With that, the two guards left the room and locked the door, leaving Bighawk alone with the dark-skinned young man. Bui grinned at the half-orc.

"Hey, Belial."

Bighawk's expression, which had remained thoroughly composed thus far, suddenly twisted in shock. Belial was the true name of the contract demon. The names ascribed by non-demons were by and large based off the characteristics each kind of demon exuded. True names were only used in secret among demons and were never to be revealed to other species, even if it meant that a demon would lose its life.

"Don't look so surprised. I've actually eaten a contract demon once before, long ago. We know the true names of almost all of our kind."

"Wh-why are you here?!" the possessed Bighawk demanded.

"Red sending me off ahead was quite the boon. It would've been a problem if my true form had been revealed back there."

"Asur—!"

Bui—Shisandan—grabbed the contract demon's neck to silence it before it could scream.

"Do none of you pay any heed to the consequences of your actions? To think you would make use of Devil's Blessing. What were you going to do if they realized that drug doesn't actually require a demon's heart to make? You know it has the potential to awaken the true power lying dormant within people. I thought God had forbidden its use."

"The Lord will forgive our sins if it means eliminating you heretics..."

"One of God's envoys tasked with keeping the sins of the people in check is now the very thing committing sins? How fascinating."

Sweat began to form on Bighawk's body. *This is bad. He knows how to kill me while I'm inside here...!*

The contract demon could no longer afford to worry about losing levels as a consequence of breaking its agreement.

"I, Belial, do hereby declare my contract with Bighawk null and void!" The demon wheezed as Shisandan's hand closed around the half-orc's throat.

A written accord appeared, floating in the air. The document

ripped itself in half with a loud tearing sound.

A torrent of magic power began to whirl around Belial, forcing Shisandan to step back for fear of getting caught in the vortex.

"Kiiiiiiii!"

Amid the swirl, the contract demon's true form appeared. It looked to be a human creature with goat legs and horns growing from its head. It unleashed a burst of flame to slow Shisandan down and headed straight for the door.

"What's happening?!"

Having heard the commotion through the wall, one of the guards called out from the neighboring room. Such an action proved to be the poor man's undoing, however. Belial rammed its body into the door with all of its superhuman strength. The steel door warped and flew from its hinges, unable to contain the demon. The guard had been standing right behind the door and went flying down the hall with it. The impact snapped his neck, killing him instantly. The only silver lining was that it all happened rather quickly, so the unfortunate man never had the time to feel any terror or pain.

With a roar, Belial broke into a sprint. While the prison guards had been trained for a jailbreak, they panicked at the sight of such a powerful demon and stood frozen in fear.

Curiously, the rampaging creature did not make to leave the complex but instead hurried for a cell.

"Albert!"

A bandage around his right arm, the man looked up at the demon with a lifeless gaze from behind a mess of hair.

"Albert! Make a new wish! Ask to escape here and go to the Hero's side!" Belial insisted.

"...I don't care anymore."

"You don't have the luxury of choice! You swore to devote your life to defeating the demon lord! The agreement won't allow you to just rot away down here! Now wish anew!"

That was why the contract demon had been able to remain so calm. While Albert hadn't offered up his soul in the first accord, if ever he reached a point where he was out of options when trying to defeat the demon lord, he would have no choice but to make another deal with his soul on the line.

"...Fine, do as you please then."

Albert could feel the force of the contract compelling him, and he readily agreed without making so much as an effort to resist.

"Good! I, Belial, do hereby join a contract with Albert here!"

Typically, demonic arrangements were formed only after ensuring there were no dubious clauses or loopholes, but there was no time for that now. Belial only cared about escape. The resistance needed the

data the demon had gathered from the Devil's Blessing trials in Zoltan.

While incomplete, Belial's contract magic still worked. A document, pen, and knife appeared from nowhere.

"Hurry it up!" the creature urged. Albert slowly took the pen and signed his name. He then reached toward the knife.

"Does it still work if I use my left hand?"

"That's fine! Just do it already!"

Albert pressed his left thumb against the little blade, opening a small cut. As fresh blood ran down his finger, he pushed it to the written accord.

"The contract has been signed and sealed! In exchange for thy wish, thy soul shall become mine!"

I made it! The demon breathed a sigh of relief. *But how?*

The Asura demon had been provided with more than enough time to catch up. Belial was suspicious of that, but a swirl of magic exploded from the newly formed contract and filled the cell. When it subsided, both Albert and the demon were gone.

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Peering in from the entrance, Bui smiled happily.

"Looks like it all worked out."

Shisandan had been concerned that the contract demon would expose the Asura demon. Normally, no one would've believed such a thing. The claim would be discarded as the desperate delusions of a condemned man. There was, however, at least one person in Zoltan who might've taken such an accusation more seriously. That was what Shisandan was most wary of.

"Bui! Are you okay?!"

"Yes. Unfortunately, it managed to escape."

Hearing a jailer approach, Bui turned and responded with a look of chagrin. No one was going to blame him for letting an upper-tier demon escape, however. Such a creature was not something that Zoltan, now lacking even a B-rank adventurer, was remotely equipped to handle. If anything, Bui was likely to be praised for having fended the fiend off.

As he considered a few things he wanted to look into, Bui explained about the contract demon to the guards who had come running to check on him.

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Having cleared the encampment of the demon lord's forces, Ruti was

busy gathering anything of value. All of a sudden, a disheveled-looking man with one hand appeared from nowhere, accompanied by a contract demon in its true form.

Before the Hero could draw her sword, the creature activated a skill.

“Mind Plane Shift!”

Ruti realized that she was no longer in the demon encampment in the middle of a forest but a blasted wasteland. The man who had been beside the demon had disappeared. Ruti tilted her head just slightly.

“We meet for the first time, Ruti the Hero. I am what you know as a contract demon.”

Ruti watched in silence as the demon introduced itself with the utmost courtesy. She reached for the sword at her waist, but the Holy Demon Slayer had seemingly transformed into a shabby bronze sword.

“You and I stand on a mental plane. Please forgive my impertinence, but I brought you here because I would like to discuss something with you.”

“I’ll forgive it. Discuss what?” Ruti asked.

“You seem at ease. Perhaps you are looking for an opening to strike back, but I implore you to allow me an explanation first. This is a mirror dimension created by our consciousnesses. As such, any wounds incurred here will be similarly reflected on our physical bodies. Please be careful.”

“I see.”

“The you in reality is undoubtedly quite powerful, but in this world, the vast majority of skills and magic are limited. Thus, combat here requires a certain amount of practice. For example...”

The contract demon took a moment to focus.

“You.” “Can.” “Do.” “This.”

Copies of the contract demon appeared one after the other. In a matter of moments, the wasteland had become filled with duplicates of the contract demon.

“Well? Were you perhaps surprised?”

“I don’t get surprised.”

“Is that so? And it always got such lovely reviews from everyone else. Anyway, I believe I’ve made it clear that fighting me in this realm would be a poor decision. You and I share a common foe in the demon lord, so I have no interest in killing you, either. So let us proceed with our discussion amicably.”

The goat-hooved creature appeared rather at ease, likely because it knew it had the upper hand. That didn’t mean it could be careless, however. Belial hoped to make an ally of the Hero, something that would more than make up for the creature’s failures in Zoltan.

“Fight?” Ruti tilted her head as she asked a single-word question

while staring down at her bronze sword.

“What?!” the contract demon exclaimed, stunned. With a glittering flash, the near-useless weapon at Ruti’s hip became the Holy Demon Slayer.

Th-that’s not possible?! Reproducing an artifact-tier magic item in the mental realm?! Even I can’t do that...

“I see. I think I get how it works,” Ruti murmured to herself.

She held the sword aloft, and a stream of silver rain began to pummel the earth.

“Uh— Ah... E-eeeeeeep!” For the first time in its many hundreds of years, the contract demon was truly frozen in terror.

What fell from the sky was not silver-colored water but, rather, an uncountable number of holy swords. The many blades sped from above, aiming themselves at the copies of Belial that littered the surroundings.

“Th-that’s impossible! This can’t be happening! Manifesting so many artifacts?! I’ve never heard of any demon lord or Hero being able to do something like that!”

In the blink of an eye, the scorched plains were soaked with fiend blood. After only a brief moment, the lands had been transformed into a crimson bog that reeked of death.

“Anyway, what did you want to talk about?” Ruti asked, her expression just as blank as it ever was.

Belial clutched its head and screamed, sinking to the ground at the gruesome scene.

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“I see.” Ruti nodded emotionlessly after hearing what her unlikely visitor had to say.

“Y-yes! I am by no means at odds with the humans or any other residents of this continent. We share a common enemy, the blasphemous demon lord who has chosen to rebel against God. Demons as a race are indeed inimical to the denizens of Avalon, but above all, we are also followers of the same Almighty God, Demis. We are capable of looking past the previous enmity and fighting together with humans in order to defeat the heretics who would defy God!”

Rather frantically, Belial weaved its tale as Ruti listened with a smile so slight that only her older brother would’ve caught it.

So this is the truth of the beings called demons. Intriguing. If Big Brother were here, he would be shocked. We could probably have spent hours of discussion theorizing about it.

That thought made Ruti slightly disappointed, and just that slight quiver of emotion was enough to cause the contract demon to shudder

and let out a small shriek. The pair had returned to reality. Belial's arms and fingers were bound, and it was sitting with Ruti in her tent, undergoing questioning.

It hadn't been tortured at all. Instead, the creature merely understood the absolute difference in strength between it and the being embodied in the girl sitting before it. Belial had lost all desire to resist and was merely hoping to escape this situation alive.

Waiting outside the tent, the Hero's party was secretly sympathetic to the creature's predicament. Being alone and questioned by Ruti was frightening. The demon had no way of knowing how the others felt, however.

Albert had been tied up and interrogated by Ares, but he had already been left alone after Ares had decided that there was nothing valuable to be learned from him.

"So about this medicine, 'Devil's Blessing.'"

"It's a drug made using an ax demon's heart, creating a pseudo-Ax Demon blessing. Its strength is that it allows the manipulation of blessing levels."

"Manipulation?"

"Yes, ma'am! By taking it once, a single level transfers to the Devil's Blessing. However, if the medicine is not taken again within one week, one level will return from the Devil's Blessing to the user's innate blessing."

"And?"

"The more valuable aspect of this is not so much the shift itself, but the fact that it causes the user's blessing level to decrease. As you know, blessings can only grow by defeating beings with a level similar to one's own. The Devil's Blessing won't grow with combat...but if one used this substance, their original blessing would temporarily lower, granting the ability to enhance one's blessing more efficiently. And the user's combat ability would not go down thanks to the Devil's Blessing!"

That was the reason why these demons, who as a race were more faithful than any other, had shared the secret of a mixture that had been forbidden by God. To those like Belial, the Devil's Blessing was not a drug for repudiating one's assigned blessing but a substance for pushing that blessing to new heights.

"I see." Ruti played with the bag of powdered medicine she had taken from the goat-legged thing.

"And this would be useful in the fight to defeat the demon lord?"

"Y-yes! Th-though for someone of your strength, the effects might not be particularly dramatic."

"Then let's give it a try."

"Huh?"

Before Belial's eyes, Ruti swallowed the medicine without any hesitation. The demon was at a loss for words, and its eyes widened in shock. It had, of course, wanted to get close to the Hero. If it had thought the Devil's Blessing would help the Hero at all, it would've even surrendered the drug to her. Never had the creature imagined Ruti to so readily down the stuff, however.

"Poisons, sicknesses, and curses have no effect on me. If this weren't really some kind of medicine, then my immunities would have kicked in," Ruti explained blankly, perhaps noticing the demon's expression.

Belial had already been astonished, but upon hearing that, the demon broke into a cold sweat.

Curses? Curses?! She has Immunity to Curses?! This isn't good! That medicine transforms the grudge of the ax demon killed to make it and weaves it into the mixture in order to maintain the demon's blessing that was supposed to have been lost when it died! If the curse doesn't activate, then the Ax Demon blessing might be lost, too!

It was far too late to stop things now. Ruti had already taken the medicine. Belial's only hope was that the Hero would vomit the substance back up before it got into her system, but the demon hardly possessed the power to force something like that to happen.

With a silent prayer to God, the contract demon prayed that the Devil's Blessing would manifest.

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In the early morning of the day that followed, Ares and Theodora watched with dumbfounded expressions as the airship sailed into the horizon. Still tied up, Albert watched on with unease, not entirely understanding the situation.

"What happened?" Theodora asked.

"I don't know. Maybe the airship was stolen...?" Ares replied.

"Don't play stupid. Neither the Hero nor Tisse is here. We've been left behind," Theodora said.

"Th-that's absurd! There's no way! How would they fight without my magic?!" Ares questioned.

"I'm sure the Hero will manage," Theodora fired back coolly. Ignoring Ares, she went to investigate Ruti's emptied out tent.

"This is..."

The contract demon's corpse lay on the ground with its head severed from its body.

"I suppose this rules out the possibility that she's been tricked by the demon..."

A few bits of equipment and survival gear were strewn about, but

it seemed that Ruti had taken the important things along with her via her item box. However...

“Th-that’s impossible!”

A shiver ran down Theodora’s spine when she saw a certain object discarded on the ground.

“The proof of the Hero! The legendary orichalcum talisman that was sealed in the ancient elf ruins?!”

Despite residing in a forest near the capital, the ancient elf ruins had never before been entered, and this charm Ruti had left behind had been found at the deepest level of those old elven buildings. Returning with that item had been how Ruti had gotten the world to acknowledge her as the Hero.

It seemed impossible that Ruti the Hero would cast aside something like that, yet here it was.

“Maybe I should go back to where we found the airship.”

Alone, Theodora left the camp.

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My name is Tisse Garland. I’m a member of the Assassins Guild and a bearer of the Divine Blessing of the Assassin.

As a child, I was sold to a slave merchant and bought at the market by my guild. I’ve made a living as a hired killer for as long as I can remember. My favorite food is oden chikuwa.

After a particular series of events, I wound up becoming a member of the Hero’s party.

Admittedly, there was always some part of me that dreamed of being a hero one day, but my client, Mr. Ares, made it very clear that I was just filling an empty spot until he could find the next *real* member.

I have a pet jumping spider named Mister Crawly Wawly. The *Mister* is part of his name. He looks really cute when he raises his front legs and waves them. I’m glad that the Assassin blessing has access to the skill Spider Understanding so I can handle venomous spiders.

Despite how scary things were on the airship, Mister Crawly Wawly was moving cheerfully across my shoulders, waving a foreleg to cheer me on. I was glad for it, because I thought I was going to throw up from how scary it all was.

“How long until we reach Zoltan?” a bone-chilling voice demanded.

“It should be about three days, I think...”

“That’s amazing. Even an express ship would have taken more than a week.”

I think she was pleased, but it was hard to tell when her

expression never changed. My heart thrummed in my ears as my hands trembled, and my body sweated profusely. Basically, I was scared for my life.

Even faced with milady the Hero, you're still just fine because you have me, Mister Crawly Wawly communicated to me via a tap on my shoulder. It was a nice thing to say, but I definitely wasn't okay. By using something I'd learned from my guild, I was able to keep a straight face, but on the inside, I was in tears.

I was operating an airship.

According to a legend that comes from the homeland of an old friend of mine in the Assassins Guild, there was an orc hero named Whitefang who'd betrayed one of the previous demon lords, stole an airship, and fought for justice alongside humanity.

My friend hadn't believed the legend, either, of course, but she was quite skilled at telling stories. When I asked, she told me her blessing was Deadly Courtesan, an upper-class prostitute assassin. Maybe that was why her tales sounded so enthralling.

Anyway, there was a part in her tale where Whitefang taught the young slave girl he fell in love with how to control the airship.

It was just a sing-along sort of song to explain the way to fly the vessel, but I would never have imagined I would actually end up using that knowledge to control an actual one myself.

There were some subtle differences, but by putting some unused skill points I'd had saved into the common skill Steering, I figured out the rest with a little trial and error. The downside was that I ended up being forced by the Hero to fly the ship.

"U-um..."

"What?"

"If you'd rather not say, I won't pry, but...why Zoltan?"

I really wanted to ask why the Hero had left the rest of her party behind, but I was too scared to inquire about something like that.

Please help me, Mister Crawly Wawly, I thought.

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I glanced down, but Mister Crawly Wawly just tilted his head, at a loss for how to respond. He sure was cute.

The Hero looked a little bit troubled, but she pulled a small paper package out of her cloak and showed it to me.

"I have the recipe for how to make this medicine, but I don't know what skills are required to prepare it. That's why I'm going to Zoltan. That's where the person who made it is."

"A medicine?"

"Yes."

"..."

"..."

“U-um, what kind of medicine is it?”

When I asked that, something truly terrifying happened. The Hero looked me straight in the eyes...and her lips spread into a smile. Someone once told me that smiles were originally expressions of savage aggression. I was scared to my core.

“I-I’m sor—”

“This remedy is my only hope, but there are only three doses left. The effect only lasts one week, so I need to be able to restock at a consistent interval... That’s why I want to reach Zoltan as soon as possible.”

“Y-yes, ma’am! I’ll do my best!”

Arghhhh! I shouldn’t have asked!

All I needed to do was take the Hero wherever she wanted to go. I had no reason to overthink things. At best, I was just an extension of the airship—a cog spinning away.

Mister Crawly Wawly hopped up and down on my shoulder, doing his best to comfort me.

Don’t worry, I’ll do my best. I promised to find you a cute partner, after all.

Mister Crawly Wawly’s cute little movements were the only thing keeping me going.

“The weather’s nice,” the Hero said as she looked up at the sky.

I’m just a cog in the machine. Gotta keep spinning...

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“Thank you for everything,” Al said as he lowered his head.

Evening had come rather quickly. Al had helped out at the store during the day and had trained with Rit afterward. Following that, the three of us shared a nice dinner.

“You can stay the night if you want, you know,” Rit offered.

Al smiled appreciatively, but he shook his head.

“No, it’s too comfortable here... If I slept here, I wouldn’t leave until noon, and then it’d be dusk again before I knew what’d happened.”

“I see.”

The shotel Rit and I had bought for Al was at the boy’s waist. Draped over his shoulders was a durable traveler’s cloak that Rit had picked out for him. Beneath it, he was wearing the silver breastplate he’d received from Bighawk. Apparently, Albert had been the one who’d selected it. The fact that it fit Al perfectly even though they had never met in person was a testament to Albert’s sense of gear that he’d honed to make sure that his comrades who lacked strength would not be defeated when taking on B-rank quests.

On Al's back was a bag with preserved rations, a whetstone, some rope, soap, a lantern, fuel, flint and tinder, vials of hemostatic and disinfectant that I had picked out for him, three cure potions, an iron pot, cooking utensils, and a sleeping bag.

Equipped as he was, anyone would think him a proper adventurer, no matter where he went.

"I'm sorry for intruding on your dinner."

A woman in a monastic outfit lowered her head apologetically. She was Ria, the monk who had previously been in Albert's party.

She and a couple of others had ended up forming a party with Al to go out adventuring. It was an E-rank party, in line with Al's rank.

In the aftermath of the Devil's Blessing incident, the contract demon and Albert had seemingly escaped from prison. Bighawk had been left behind but had lost all of the bulk he'd built up. What remained of the half-orc was little more than a shriveled husk.

Normally, there would've been no escaping a death sentence for what Bighawk had done, but the demon scholars in Central had expressed an interest in someone who'd survived an agreement with a contract demon, so Bighawk had been carted off to the capital the other day.

The whole thing was quite the shake-up for Zoltan. The number two of the Thieves Guild and the top adventurer in the town had been exposed as conspirators, there was almost a riot among the citizenry, demons had been discovered in town, a strange drug had been circulated, and several people had lost their lives.

After things had finally quieted down, however, the people of Zoltan went about their lives as if little had changed. Residents of Southmarsh still bore hostility toward lawmen, and the upper and lower classes still held fast to their dislike of each other. Albert was gone, but Bui had taken over as a B-rank adventurer in his stead. From what I'd been hearing, he seemed to be doing quite well.

Most things seemed unchanged. There was one major difference to come out of all that trouble, however.

"Your words were deeply moving! When you managed to stop the fighting before it broke out like that, I realized you had the qualities of a real hero!"

Apparently, Albert's party members had been at Bighawk's mansion during the gathering. After it had calmed down, Ria had been so moved by Al and Ademi's plea that she'd resolved to team up with the young weapon master.

At such an unexpected request, Al had replied, "I'm still just a level-one novice, but...I look forward to working with you!"

Where had that boy who'd been so scared of his own blessing gone? He'd vanished, and in his place was a determined young

adventurer who'd come to accept his blessing and was moving ahead in life.

Many things returned to normal after all the trouble in Zoltan, but Al had forever changed.

"Anyway, we're headed out now!" Al said, extending his hand. Rit and I both gave it a firm handshake.

"Do your best," Rit encouraged.

"If you ever need medicine, don't hesitate to stop by. You'll always have a discount here," I said.

"I could never! I'm going to find an amazing treasure. Once I do, I'll come back and buy so much from your shop that you'll be able to give Miss Rit a mithril ring!" Al declared.

"That would be lovely!" Rit replied.

"Mithril, huh. That's some big talk," I commented.

Not bad, I thought. It's confidence that helps you grow. I patted Al's curly head. I was suddenly struck by the realization that this was likely to be the last time I'd be able to treat him like a child. Some part of me was a little bit sad.

"Do your best, young adventurer," I said.

"Yes, sir!" Al flashed a broad smile. With the tiniest bit of loneliness in his eyes, he departed.

"He really left," I muttered.

"Yup," Rit answered.

"Having him stay here kind of felt like raising a kid," I thought aloud.

"I had that same thought," Rit admitted.

The two of us exchanged a look.

"Kids, huh? That wouldn't be so bad." A grin spread across my face.

"No, it wouldn't." Rit wore the same sort of expression.

After what'd felt like no end of trouble, our slow and easy Zoltan life had finally returned.

Epilogue

The Hero Reaches Zoltan, in Search Of...

"I'm Ruti the Hero," the blue-haired girl said as she held out a hand.

A fearful cold sweat began to form on my nape.

My name is Tisse Garland. I'm a member of the Assassins Guild and a bearer of the Divine Blessing of the Assassin. Only moments ago, I had joined up with the Hero's party.

I never would've expected it myself, but no sooner had I been recruited than I found myself in some serious trouble. The Hero, Ms. Ruti, was a far more terrifying person to behold than I ever could've imagined. She appeared no different than a normal girl, but just feeling her cold, red eyes fall on me was more than I could handle. Beneath that gaze, all I could think was how badly I wanted to run and hide somewhere dark enough that she couldn't find me.

The Hero's hand was still extended toward me. Ignoring that seemed like a very bad idea. Supposedly, I was the person who'd been brought in to replace Ms. Ruti's older brother, a knight named Gideon, because he'd left the party. After losing someone so important to her, there was no way the Hero wasn't holding it against me. With caution, I took Ms. Ruti's hand.

How can a palm exude such pressure?! I thought.

The one who'd hired me, Ares the Sage, smiled broadly as he watched us exchange pleasantries.

"This is Gideon's successor. I'll assume the routine tasks he handled before, but I'm afraid I'm ill-suited to the type of close-combat work he did. By all reports, this assassin is the best of the best, even among her guild's elites. I'm sure she will be far more reliable than Gideon was."

Mr. Ares's introduction was meant as praise, but I couldn't have felt more ill at ease. Comparing me to Gideon was only going to make things worse. Mr. Danan and Ms. Theodora looked me up and down with some very menacing expressions.

While I kept my face as placid as possible, that didn't mean I didn't feel anything. Things were so uncomfortable that my stomach was in knots. Despite how I might've appeared, I was the kind of

person who got depressed when I couldn't get along with other people.

Mr. Ares came over and placed a hand on my shoulder, nearly squashing Mister Crawly Wawly as he did. I fired a reproachful gaze at him, but he didn't seem to register it.

Mister Crawly Wawly wasn't so weak as to go out like that, anyhow. As if to reassure me, my pet spider tapped my shoulder with his leg to let me know that he was fine.

"Ares might've been the one who hired you, but you'll be following my orders, not his. Will that be a problem?" Ms. Ruti asked.

"Not at all. Having multiple chains of command in a party with a handful of people could cause some confusion. I will obey your orders as everyone else does."

My job was to support the Hero's party. Mr. Ares was the one who'd found and recruited me, but the money I'd received had come from the party. That meant Mr. Ares wasn't my actual employer—Ms. Ruti was.

From what I could tell, Mr. Ares was a very ambitious man. He always seemed to be planning for things after the demon lord was defeated. Making such plans was important, I suppose, but I'd only been brought on to help with the quest to defeat the demon lord, so I didn't think about things like that very often.

"Okay. Here's your first order. We were just about to go eliminate the dust dragons from the diseased swamp. They're planning to join up with the demon lord's forces. You are to come with us," Ms. Ruti stated.

"You're going to fight Vathek? The ancient dust dragon lord of the diseased swamp?"

Yikes... No one said anything about battling a dragon lord.

Ancient dragons were living legends. They were creatures that had lived for over a thousand years. Among such rare and powerful beings, Vathek had risen even further to become a dragon lord, the apex of the many dragons living in the diseased swamp.

If it'd been anyone else but Ms. Ruti, I would've thought it to be a joke. It clearly wasn't, however, and I was left with no choice but to steel my nerves.

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Sludge that stank of rot and decay rose as far as the knee. The bog's wildlife and plants had all been warped by the constant presence of the dust dragons. From every which way, grotesque beasts glared at us as we trudged forward. A chorus of muddy, gurgling sounds could be heard all around. It felt as though the very marshland itself was

against us.

Everyone living in the southwest knew of the diseased swamp. Vathek was the only member of the four ancient dragons of darkness who resided on Avalon.

Three ancient dragons of darkness and their followers had crossed the ocean from the dark continent during the war with the previous demon lord. Two had left when the demon lord's forces had retreated, but the dragon lord Vathek had lost a wing in the battle with the previous Hero. Unable to fly back home, Vathek and its followers claimed dominion over a region that festered and became the diseased swamp after a time.

That powerful creature was going to be our opponent.

"Watch it! Get back!" cried Mr. Danan, the martial artist.

The ground around our feet started to sink. I frantically leaped back, but Mr. Danan and I were the only ones who managed to escape in time.

Mr. Ares was a sage, so he didn't have any particularly great physical ability, and Ms. Theodora was weighed down by heavy armor. It made sense that they'd been caught. Ms. Ruti also found herself trapped. She stared blankly at the swirling ground below her.

"T-Tisse! Do something!" shouted Mr. Ares as he stretched a hand in my direction. I didn't budge, however.

"Hurry up and throw me a rope! Did you panic already, you incompetent!" Again, Mr. Ares barked an order, but I didn't so much as lift a finger.

As she sank past her waist, the Hero looked not to me but to Mr. Ares and signaled for him to look up.

"You take care of up there. I'll take care of down here." With that, the Hero leaped into the muck. As if on cue, six dust dragons, each the size of an elephant, dived down from above.

"E-eep!"

Two of them charged for Mr. Ares, who was still stuck and unable to move, but I leaped into the air and sliced them with my shortsword. They were the reason I hadn't been able to assist Mr. Ares. Throwing a rope would've given the dragons an opening that could've meant our deaths.

"I will guard you, so please focus on your magic, sir...," I said.

"I—I don't need you to tell me that!" Mr. Ares snapped.

Battling a giant dragon that was flying through the sky above while stuck on the ground in mud that clung to your boots was not exactly favorable.

Glancing around, I saw that Mr. Danan and Ms. Theodora were each fighting a dragon separately. Apparently, it didn't occur to them to fight together.

With an internal sigh, I leaped from the tiny spot I'd found that was free of sinkholes or sticky muck to rejoin the fight.

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"Not too shabby," Ms. Theodora complimented as she healed my wounds with magic.

Six dragons had attacked us from above. Of those, Mr. Ares and I had defeated two. Ms. Theodora had impaled one with her spear despite being unable to move. Mr. Danan had defeated the remaining three by himself.

Were it not for Mr. Ares's powerful magic, I almost certainly would not have been able to finish off the pair I'd engaged.

I was quite confident that I was among the top five members of the Assassins Guild, but those three were far beyond me. More so than any of us, however...

"The Hero is quite remarkable," I commented.

"She's not regarded as humanity's strongest warrior for nothing. The Hero's on a totally different level than us," Ms. Theodora responded with a distant look in her eyes.

The Hero conjured up some water and poured it over her head to wash the sludge away, with the corpse of a giant dragon at her back. It was the very same one that had dragged the party into the swamp.

While not actually Vathek, it was large enough that just about anyone would've mistaken it for a dragon lord. It was probably one of the older dragons that had survived the previous war.

To defeat a dragon of that magnitude would've normally required a force of several thousand. Successfully felling the creature would've made the commander of such an expedition a notable historic figure for the rest of time. Ms. Ruti had accomplished all that on her own. Even the hindering terrain of the mire hadn't fettered her.

Perhaps noticing my gaze, Ms. Ruti bluntly stated, "I'm planning to defeat an enemy that no army would ever have a chance against. This much is nothing."

She had a point. The Hero meant to slay a dragon lord who had fought alongside a previous demon lord several hundred years ago. Many had tried to fell Vathek in the past, but all had failed.



Such a mighty foe wasn't even Ms. Ruti's ultimate goal. Beyond the dragon lord was Taraxon, the current demon lord assailing Avalon. Failing to take out some no-name dust dragon in a swamp was out of the question for the bearer of the blessing of the Hero.

It was a bit late for it, but realizing that I was a member of Ms. Ruti's party sent a shiver down my spine.

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I loved heroic epics growing up. It was a fellow member of the Assassins Guild, a woman named Erin, who'd instilled the love of such stories in me.

Erin had a gift for spinning yarns, and she used to tell me all sorts of tales of daring exploit back when we shared a room.

The one where the orc hero Whitefang traveled the world in an airship and went on adventures to help the young slave girl he loved was my favorite.

Unlike other heroes, who were chivalrous to a fault, Whitefang was violent, quick to start a fight, and had a cruel streak. When it came to the one he loved, however, he never hesitated to rush into danger. I was probably drawn to that disconnect.

His story ended pretty differently from the usual sort, too. He'd lost his airship and was being pursued by wyvern knights led by the heavenly king of the wind. Undaunted, Whitefang never gave up and continued to run, crossing a desert without food or water, all while carrying his weakened beloved on his back. After a long journey, he finally reached allied forces.

The demon lord army's careless pursuit of the orc had led them straight into enemy territory. The wicked evildoers were forced to retreat in the face of such a powerful counterattack from the high elf army.

"Then, Whitefang and the former slave girl were joined in an interracial marriage, and the two of them lived happily ever after in a small village in the north, far removed from the flames of war."

Whitefang's epic finished with the exact sort of happy ending that I loved.

Never had I guessed that I'd end up in a tale like the ones Erin used to recount. I suppose it was obvious, but the reality was quite different from fiction.

"What the hell happened, Ares?!" Mr. Danan shouted angrily. The man's face was already scary, but now it was contorted in rage. "You were right about the Resist Poison potions keeping us safe, but all our food and water is useless now!"

Mr. Danan thrust a piece of dried meat, soured by the diseased swamp's ambient miasma, at Mr. Ares. The sage was at a loss for words and glanced over at Ms. Theodora in a bid for assistance.

"If Lady Yarandrala were here, she could have at least purified some vegetables and fruits. The best I can do is create some water."

"Th-that will have to do, then. We'll just have to get by on only water for now. We should reach Vathek's lair tomorrow," Mr. Ares said with a nod. He was trying with all his might to force a smile across his pale face and convince Mr. Danan.

"Don't screw with me!" Mr. Danan grabbed Mr. Ares by his tunic. "I checked to be sure, didn't I? I asked you, 'Is the food going to be all right?' And what did you tell me, you son of a bitch?"

"No one could have predicted that the bog's vapors would manage to get into our item boxes!" Mr. Ares cried as he pushed Mr. Danan back. Immediately, there was a dangerous tension between the two.

"I'll go ahead by myself," the Hero announced with her usual deadpan expression.

Mr. Ares and Mr. Danan both looked taken aback at that, putting an end to their argument.

"R-Ruti! Even for you, going alone is pretty reckless."

"None of you can fight without food to eat, but I don't need food, so it won't be a problem."

The Hero's blessing afforded her many immunities. Undoubtedly, one of them somehow supplanted her need to eat. Even so, going off alone to fight the strongest dragon in all of Avalon seemed like a dangerous idea.

"There is no telling when Vathek might make its move. If the dust dragons decide to leave, they'll cut a path of decay across the land. That's why Vathek must be defeated here and now," the Hero explained, her voice showing no trace of emotion.

Nothing in her words expressed patience nor concern for us and our inability to keep up with her. Everything about the way Ms. Ruti spoke was matter-of-fact and straightforward.

Mr. Ares, Mr. Danan, and I were rightfully bewildered, but Ms. Theodora stood up and nodded.

"There's no proof that we'll find Vathek tomorrow, and even if we stayed, we would just slow the search down. Until we find a solution to the food problem, we should entrust this matter to the Hero and head back."

"Theodora!" Mr. Ares cried out reproachfully, but Ms. Theodora merely smiled ever so faintly.

"If I may?" I asked, raising my hand.

All at once, I felt every member of the party turn to look at me. Mr. Ares glared as though angered that I had spoken out of turn.

Something in my stomach churned nervously.

“I think this should be edible.”

I pulled a pellet the size of a cherry wrapped in a packet out of my item box.

“It’s a kind of emergency ration that members of the Assassins Guild use. The paper wrapped around it has been coated with a medicine that prevents sewage and poisonous gas from contaminating it. The pellet itself also contains medicinal herbs prepared by an alchemist, so a single one can provide enough sustenance to maintain vital functions for one day. It tastes like mud, though, so I can’t promise they’re very tasty.”

There were times when a hired killer had to wait in sewage for days at a time. This secret compound had been developed to keep you alive in that sort of situation. The recipe was a trade secret, but giving a few to my party members so they wouldn’t go hungry was likely all right.

“Food from an assassin... Is it really edible?” Mr. Ares eyed the little pellets suspiciously.

“Nice—you’re a lifesaver.” While Mr. Danan’s face was still red from his previous exchange, a smile spread across his face. He took one of the little balls from my hand, tore through the wrapping that usually required a knife to get through, and tossed the tiny sphere into his mouth.

“Wow, that really is nasty,” he said.

“I’m sorry. Also, you need to suck on it for thirty minutes without swallowing it,” I added.

“That right? Either way, thanks. I wasn’t sure what to think of you since Ares was the one who brought you on board, but you’re pretty useful to have around.”

Please stop! I screamed in my mind. Wording it that way will only make Mr. Ares angry with me!

Internally, I felt a hot wash of trepidation crash over me. I made sure not to let it show on my face, however.

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“A bit disillusioned?”

A voice called out to me as I was setting up camp. Turning around, I saw Ms. Theodora. I tilted my head, unsure what she meant.

“We look a mess, right? We’re a rather ill-prepared bunch for being the group that’s supposed to save the world.”

“...I wasn’t thinking anything like that,” I replied.

It was true that the party had terrible teamwork. The Hero always faced off against the strongest enemy while the remaining members

just divvied up any weaker creatures among themselves. Because each individual was so mighty, it still worked anyway, but if the opponents were more powerful, the party members would surely end up getting picked off one by one instead. As an assassin, I'd been trained to use everything at my disposal to gain the upper hand. That included cooperation with allies, so it was difficult to work in this group.

"Things weren't always this way, you know."

Ms. Theodora was watching the Hero, who had carelessly laid down her holy sword and was just staring off into the distance.

"Not that long ago, we all worked as a team. Together we pinpointed enemy weaknesses and always knew when to go on the offensive or defensive. The Hero paid attention to what was happening with her comrades while she fought, instead of just fighting alone, too."

"Was it because of Mr. Gideon?"

"Yes. It changed after we lost Sir Gideon. Ever since, the party has fallen apart."

Gideon Ragnason. I had heard that the reason I had been added to the party was because he'd left. As Mr. Ares described it, he had been holding the party back. That didn't really seem the case to me, though.

"We encountered a similar corrosive effect to the one this swamp has back in a place called the Bloody Sewers. Sir Gideon had dealt with it by covering the item boxes with a special cloth beforehand. It was probably similar to the wrapping paper that your pellets use... He always made sure to take care of anything that might've hindered our combat capabilities. He didn't have any skills, and yet we've descended to such a state without him."

"..."

"It was the same in combat as well. Sir Gideon didn't just give orders without explanation. He understood his position as an aide for the Hero and somehow coordinated things so well that it allowed us all to do as we liked. Looking back on it now, it's a wonder to think how he managed it."

Ms. Theodora closed her eyes in recollection. Her words seemed more for herself than me. Not knowing what to say, I remained silent.

"Lady Yarandrala left, and no one in the group trusts one another anymore. Sir Gideon was crucial to this party... So why did the Hero...?"

As Ms. Theodora slipped into thought, I quietly moved away. The more I saw, the less confident I was that the party would hold together.



The search of the diseased swamp took far longer than anticipated. The map of the area that Mr. Ares had obtained from a local lord wasn't reliable.

We pushed our way through the toxic bog while battling dust dragons from above and other creatures like parasitic frogs from below.

As an assassin who had been trained to endure harsh environments, even I was getting fed up with it.

To make matters worse, a certain someone was shouting.

"Try to pay a little attention, Danan! You don't have to inform me every time your worthless, goblin-level instincts sense something!" Mr. Ares spat.

"What'd you say?! I'm tellin' you because your directions are goddamn worthless!" Mr. Danan shot back.

It was the third fight of the day. Searching for Vathek was tiresome enough, and these arguments were only making it worse.

Ms. Theodora sighed, clearly already fed up herself. The Hero, however, paid the squabble no heed as she silently continued looking for the dragon lord.

Seven days passed, and we still hadn't turned up anything.

After Ms. Theodora had run herself ragged maintaining a protective barrier for days, we finally happened upon Vathek's nest. As befitted a greedy dragon, it had built a treasure vault out of stone in the middle of the rotten sludge and was sleeping atop the treasures it had stolen from humans.

At some point in the distant past, the golden luster of the many valuable items had no doubt illuminated the swamp. However, much of their sheen had been eaten away by the toxic body fluids of the dust dragons. They were little more than dull bits of gray trash at this point.

"Who would dare stand before me?" boomed the dragon. The leathery thing was clearly a full size larger than any of its kind we'd encountered thus far. There was an unpleasant sound that issued from its scales as it rose up.

"That's the dragon lord Vathek!" Mr. Ares shouted as he formed a sign with his left hand.

"So thou art the rumored Hero? Turn back, child. I am Vathek, the lord of impurity who causes the very earth itself to stagnate."

"Filth should be incinerated! Firestorm!" Mr. Ares's magic created a swirling mass of flame.

Vathek was consumed by the storm of fire but did little more than grin. After opening its mouth to reveal rows of uneven teeth, it breathed a corrosive poison along with bits of things it had eaten in

the past. Shards sped through Mr. Ares's burning maelstrom, catching aflame before raining down on us.

"T-Tisse!"

Before Mr. Ares could even say anything, I had already grabbed the back of his clothes and dragged him as I sprinted behind a nearby boulder.

"Oy, Ares! Your goddamn fire's getting in the way! I can't get close!"

It was hard to believe, but Mr. Danan was dodging the flurry of incoming projectiles. Similarly, Ms. Theodora was spinning her spear to deflect anything that came her way. The Hero, however, wasn't even pretending to defend herself. She just stood there, unmoving, as a hail of metal and fire assailed her.

"I could have dodged that much if it hadn't attacked right after I used my own spell." Mr. Ares was busying himself by making excuses, but it was hardly the time. The conjured flames were keeping Mr. Danan from attacking Vathek. On the positive, they were also preventing the dragon from moving as well.

Apparently, Mr. Ares intended to wait until Vathek exhausted itself while trapped in the swirling conflagration.

"This isn't an enemy that can be pinned down by a single spell," the Hero said before leaping into the fire with her sword at the ready.

Just as she'd asserted, Vathek paid no heed to its burning flesh as it swung its bony tail to knock the Hero aside. Ms. Ruti proved swifter, however.

With a loud, resounding slice, the dragon stopped moving. My eyes caught the glint of the Hero's holy sword shining amid the flames.

There was a slithering sound as the dragon's neck slumped. Its head collapsed atop the gathered treasure, and the blood bursting from its neck poured down over the collected heap. Vathek's toxic blood instantly rendered whatever valuables had remained intact through the years utterly worthless.

Vathek, the dragon lord, was dead.

Mr. Ares raised a cry of victory, but the Hero didn't appear to be in a festive mood. Instead, she was looking all around as though suspicious of something. Her sword remained at the ready.

Suddenly, three black pillars of water rose from the swamp.

"Impossible! Wasn't that Vathek?!" Ms. Theodora shouted.

Three giant dragons appeared from the liquid spires, each the same size as the one Ms. Ruti had just defeated.

"No, none of the ones we've seen are Vathek," responded the Hero quietly.

How she'd been able to predict that, I couldn't even begin to

hazard a guess. Who could've known that Vathek, the most powerful being on Avalon, was using body doubles in order to lure people into a trap?

In unison, the three duplicates bore down on Ms. Ruti.

“Skill: Assassin’s Survival.”

In the blink of any eye, the Hero was no longer the one standing before them. My heart cried out in terror as I readied my sword.

Assassin’s Survival was a skill that allowed me to instantly switch places with an ally. Traditionally, it was meant to be used to swap with a well-armored party member who could survive an oncoming attack. I had used it in a slightly different way, however.

I pierced the stunned dragon’s neck with my sword. It was little more than a pinprick considering how large the creature was, but someone with an Assassin blessing was capable of killing an opponent even with a tiny needle.

My blade tore into a vital spot where crucial nerves and blood vessels crossed. The dragon’s body convulsed for a moment before collapsing to the ground.

“How dare you!” the remaining two foes roared in a rage. That attack had only been possible because the dragons hadn’t been aware of my presence. It was impossible to repeat now that I had their attention. Even if that wasn’t the case, I didn’t have any skills capable of handling two powerful foes at once.

I raised my arms to protect myself and prepared for giant fangs to tear into my body.

Such an outcome never came to pass, however, for all the dragons’ teeth had been shattered.

“Yeah, this feels more like how things used to be.”

“We’re just moving as we please, and yet the party is naturally coming together.”

Mr. Danan and Ms. Theodora were standing to cover for me. The former’s fists and the latter’s spear had each sent one of Vathek’s doubles flying back.

Seeing that, the Hero dashed forward at full speed. Passing by us, she leaped into the air with her holy sword thrust above her head.

Simultaneously, the real Vathek emerged from its concealment magic and appeared behind us.

“Hero! Thou shalt die here at my hands!” The bellowing creature was missing one of its wings, just as the legends had described. With a deep roar, the dragon lord made known its hatred for the Hero—the one who had stolen its appendage many years ago.

Vathek opened its maw and unleashed a breath attack unlike any I’d ever seen. The usual large bits of metal had been broken down into fine particles that were interspersed with the jet of toxic liquid.



“Oh shit! Look out!” Mr. Danan warned as we leaped away from certain death. I shuddered as I saw the corrosive blast split the rocky dragon’s nest in two.

“Ms. Hero!” I reflexively shouted as the attack closed in on her. The Hero had left herself too exposed after jumping up into the air. To my surprise, she glanced at me and nodded slightly, as if to say that everything would be fine.

Clenching her left hand into a fist, Ms. Ruti knocked the acidic blast of dragon’s breath aside!

BOOM!!!

There was an explosion, and blood spewed from the dragon lord’s mouth—backlash from having its strike deflected.

Vathek staggered back, unable to believe what’d just happened. I could hardly grasp the situation, either. Somehow, Ms. Ruti had knocked back an attack that had cut through stone and ruptured the dragon lord’s throat via the resulting shock wave of her punch carrying through the liquid Vathek was expelling.

Clutching her sword in her right hand, the Hero brought it down and, in a single motion, cleaved the head of the strongest creature on Avalon clean off.

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I was lying on the ground.

“...Huh?” I asked reflexively.

“Are you okay?” Ms. Theodora was peering down at me, a bit of concern troubling her expression.

“It appears the dust dragons’ toxic gas got to you,” she informed.

“...My apologies.”

Compared to the rest of the group, my blessing level was still quite low. Evidently, I was unable to endure the poison that hardly troubled any of the others. I was a little ashamed.

“Sheesh, I paid a pretty payril for you. Can’t you manage a bit better than that?” chided Mr. Ares.

I was about to apologize, but someone else cut in.

“Tisse did well,” Ms. Ruti stated.

Mr. Ares frantically muttered a quiet excuse for himself before holding his tongue.

“Tisse, why did you help me?” the Hero asked while looking me square in the eye.

Meeting that crimson gaze, I couldn't help but gulp.

"Because I thought you were in danger," I replied.

The Hero was the crux of this party. My death wasn't much of a setback, but if Ms. Ruti fell, everything was lost. That was why I'd tried to protect her. I wanted to explain as much aloud, but I was far too nervous.

"I see," the Hero said after a moment. She nodded and stood back up. "Thank you."

It came as no small surprise to hear such words from Ms. Ruti, but I was certain I hadn't misheard her.

Mr. Danan suddenly burst out laughing at the scene. Ms. Theodora looked shocked as well but smiled nonetheless. While baffled, Mr. Ares quickly recovered and reminded everyone that it was he who had picked me out.

At that moment, we were as much a party as any other. Unfortunately, it was the first and last time that ever happened. The Hero only went on to grow stronger and stronger, and we continued to fall further behind.

Never again was there a time when I could help Ms. Ruti. She always fought alone, and she always won. The best we could do was hurry along after her.

Mr. Ares became more and more isolated, Mr. Danan was always sullen, and Ms. Theodora was always worried about the state of the party. Unable to do anything myself, I began to dwell on the fight with Vathek.

I began to suspect that Ms. Ruti had been reminded of someone else when I'd moved to save her. Doubtless, it was the only person in the world who'd ever been in a real position to protect the Hero. I held no delusions about ever being able to replace him...

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"Tisse."

The Hero's voice called to me as I floated adrift in memories long past while staring idly at the instruments dotting the helm of the airship.

I turned and saw that Ms. Ruti's cold red eyes were peering right at me. Instantly, I felt the air get sucked out of the room.

"I can see lights," she said.

"Lights?"

Walking out on the deck, I shivered as a cool night breeze caressed my cheeks.

Ms. Ruti pointed off into the distance. I followed the line of her arm and spied a cluster of glowing shapes.

“You’re right; that’s Zoltan,” I confirmed.

“I see. So we’ve finally arrived.”

The Hero’s gaze remained transfixed by the distant lights that glowed in the dark like fireflies.

“Thank you,” Ms. Ruti said.

“Eh?” I stammered, surprised.

“For bringing me all the way out here,” she added without looking away from Zoltan. That marked the second time the Hero had ever thanked me. I wondered if perhaps I’d managed to help her out again.

“So, that’s Zoltan.”

Brushing her blue hair down as it danced in the wind, Ms. Ruti’s lips curled up into an almost imperceptible smile.

I had no idea what the Hero could’ve wanted in such a nowhere sort of place, nor did I have a clue as to what was going to happen when we arrived. One thing was certain, however...

Zoltan was dead ahead.

Afterword

Thank you for picking up this book! I'm Zappa, the author.

It's thanks to your support that I was able to release a second volume!

After the first one came out, I was so nervous that I couldn't focus on anything. So when I found out there were enough readers to warrant a second printing, I was both incredibly happy and more than a little relieved.

Those of you who read the first volume surely know this already, but in case there is anyone who read this book first, this story was originally published on the website Shousetsuka ni Narou. From there, Sneaker Bunko contacted me and offered to publish it. That's how this novel ended up in your hands.

Sneaker Bunko has been putting out famous stories since the dawn of the light novel era. I always feel a surge of happiness imagining the spines of the first two volumes of this story lined up in the middle of a shelf in a bookstore. My goal is to fill an entire shelf with my work someday!

This story has also been made into a serialized manga in *Monthly Shounen Ace* by the wonderful Ikeno Masahiro! The manga is also available on ComicWalker and NicoNicoSeiga. Feel free to check it out, if you're interested! Rit has a different sort of cuteness in the manga that I'm sure those of you who enjoy this book will like!

All right, let's discuss some of the points in the narrative. Even in the second volume, the theme of the series remains unchanged—a slow and easy life.

The protagonist, Red, has been kicked out of the Hero's party but still manages to live a happy life out in the frontier town of Zoltan. There's no great deed to be done in such a place, but he has his little shop and a cute heroine by his side. That's all he needs to enjoy an easygoing life.

In order to depict that sort of a theme in a fantasy world, it was essential to establish how normal people lived, too. A simple life could only appear as such with something busier to compare it to, after all.

I considered what the standard sort of way to make a living in an RPG-esque world would be for a while. Eventually, I realized that the most efficient way for people to advance in a world where everyone's

growth charts were predetermined was to simply live according to their skill set. For example, those whose strength increased as they leveled up would be warriors. Those whose magic power grew would be mages, and so on. Anyone who ignored their stats and chose to lead a life contrary to them would have a hard time.

For this story, that idea of preset capability became the Divine Blessings granted by God. Whether heroes, villains, animals, monsters, or even insects, living according to one's ascribed role is the correct way.

Aiming to enjoy a slow life that allows you to live free and unrestricted by your Divine Blessing becomes all the more precious precisely because the world has such strict rules on everyone's lot in life.

Basically, what I am trying to say is that no matter what lands lie beyond Zoltan, whatever anyone else may be doing in the world, and regardless of what befalls the Hero and the demon lord, this will be a story about Red and Rit's happy life in Zoltan!

So long as everyone enjoys how things pan out for them, I'll be satisfied as an author.

Much like with the first volume, many people helped me complete this book and get it into your collection. I would like to take a moment to thank them.

To Yasumo, thank you for doing the illustrations for the second volume. The way Rit and Red are so close together on the cover really conveys just how happy they both are, and it's great! Thank you to the designer who managed to fit the long title so neatly onto Yasumo's illustration as well! Thank you to the proofreader who sifted through my typo-laden script for the second time and made it into the kind of writing I could proudly show my readers!

To Miyakawa, my editor, I'm genuinely grateful that you worked harder than anyone to help decide what sort of illustrations to include in the novel, how best to advertise the book, and all the other stuff. I'm truly indebted for all that you did. Thank you very much! I look forward to working together on many future publications!

Lastly, to all the readers who picked up this volume, those who have continued to follow this story since Volume 1, and those who've supported my work since its original Internet version, thank you. This book could not exist without you!

Let's meet again in Volume 3!

Zappon

2018, while looking out the window at the clouds of summer

Hello, this is Yasumo.
The characters in
this volume were
just as wonderful
as the first, and it
was a pleasure to
draw them!



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